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GHOST PLANET

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Evelyn Martin

January, 1957

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THE METAMORPHS

By

S. J. Byrne

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WHERE THE HIGH GODS GO

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JANUARY, 1957 OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES ISSUE NO. 20

Other Tongues -- Other Flesh

George Hunt Williamson

In more recent times, there has been a growing realization that on other worlds than ours, even in other universes, there are other living beings. The idea that earth-bound man may someday journey into the heavens to discover other men and women, like or unlike himself, grows by leaps and bounds. Within man's soul lies the truth — mortals exist on other spheres!

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In this book, many references and quotations are given from the latest authentic reports on Saucer phenomena. Because many believe there are contradictions in some of the reported happenings, it has been necessary to show that there is a great story and purpose behind all these experiences.

Here, in this book, is the history of OTHER TONGUES, and of OTHER FLESH; calm, scientific evidence that there are brothers of ours in the skies overhead.

We are not alone in the Universe!

WRITTEN BY A SCIENTIST AND A SCHOLAR

George Hunt Williamson served with the Army Air Corps during World War II as Radio Director for the Army Air Forces Technical Training Command. He received the Army Commendation Award from Brig. Gen. C. W. Lawrence for his outstanding record of service. He served as an instructor in Anthropology for the United States Armed Forces Institute.

He attended Cornell College, Eastern New Mexico University, the University of Arizona, and took a special course at the University of Denver. He majored in anthropology with many courses in sociology, biology, philosophy and geology.

In 1948 he was awarded the coveted Gold Key for outstanding scientific research by the Illinois State Archaeological Society. He has spent a great deal of time doing field-work in Social Anthropology in the northern part of the United States, Mexico and Canada. He is an authority on Indian dances, music and ceremonial costuming.

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THE METAMORPHS

S. J. Byrne (36,000 words) **6**

Some years ago, the words "thought-variant" were coined to describe a story with a startling new concept. Now in this story, we out-date these words. Try as we will, we can't find any words to describe this story, except to say THIS IS IT! You'll thrill to your very bones!

WHERE THE HIGH GODS GO

Robert Moore Williams (10,800 words) **66**

What magic there is in this author's name! Way back in the June 1938 issue of AMAZING STORIES we published the first story we bought from him. Today, 19 years later, we still thrill to the words that come from his wonderful imagination! This one's from Bob's very heart and soul!

GHOST PLANET

Evelyn Martin (7,300 words) **84**

Here's our 1956 Jules Verne Prize winner, back again with a story to prove she's no flash in the pan! Here's a weird one that will have your hair rising right off the top of your head! For sheer imagination, this one ought to win a prize, too — and it'll be your applause!

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Front cover by Paul Blaisdell

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....Editorial...

The editor of a science fiction magazine rarely looks at the ads in his magazine with other than a financial eye - - they help pay for the freight! But sometimes there is an exception. Usually the editor doesn't plug an ad, and although advertisers would be delighted to have the editor do so, they don't ever hope that he will. Unless he's an advertiser selling a product like Howard Browne's "Warrior of the Dawn" and its sequel! Then if the magazine editor is Ray Palmer, he gets a plug no matter what taboo is being shattered. So, as brazenly as you please (because we know you'll be as delighted as we are to see Howard's wonderful novels in print once more) we ask you to cast your eye over the opposite page and do what comes naturally!

By the way, we hear from Howard that he's busting Hollywood wide open, and he will be appearing on numerous TV shows with original stories. We wish we could list his schedule, but we just don't have it. All we can say as that like as not, if you see a terrific show on the air, you'll find the name Howard Browne flashed on your TV screen after it's over!

But enough about Howard - - let's talk about us for awhile . . . that is, about OTHER WORLDS. First, be sure to watch for the March issue! This one's going to represent a really tremendous step forward in science fiction. First, the magazine will appear in a brand-new modern dress, as modern as the mile-high building architect Frank Lloyd Wright proposes to build (if they'll believe him!) in Chicago. Remember the mile-high towers of Helium and Lesser Helium in the famous Burroughs' Mars stories! Well, Mr. Science Fiction himself, Forrest J (without a period) Ackerman, the man who leads Hollywood's list of top consultants when a science fiction movie is to be made, will introduce (and then stay with!) the new dress, and the new feature! We won't tell you what it is yet, but you'll find, at long last, something really good and really dependable in the science fiction field that it hasn't had up to now. Also, we think you'll like the new modernity of OTHER WORLDS.

When we designed the *new approach*, we had some firm convictions in mind, gained over the past two years. Yes, science fiction editors *study* the field constantly, trying to stay ahead of the other guy! We're no exception. And we honestly think we'll be ahead (no, friends, not in circulation - - because we don't aim at the big sales, we aim at top quality science fiction, and *adherence to an ideal*), based on the letters from you readers recently have been sending to us. When we get letters saying: "You've got the right idea, Ray; we're with you! Stick to it, boy!" that means more to us than being able to say: "we outsell the field". Frankly, we don't outsell the field. Actually, OTHER WORLDS is *hard to get* at the newsstands, because we print less than 40% as many copies as, for instance, *Galaxy*. However, it begins to look as though we'll have to increase our print order, if the enthusiastic letters we get are any indication. But first, we are aiming at monthly publication.

Next, the stories inside the magazine, are what we think as deserving the outer "new look"! When we give you, next issue, "Tri-Infinity" by Barry Miller, we are giving you the discovery of the de-

(*Continued on Page* 83)

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS READERS

SWASHBUCKLING FANTASTIC ADVENTURE IN THE BURROUGHS TRADITION —

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For the reader who enjoys the utmost in fast moving fantastic adventure, "The Port of Peril" will come as a very pleasant surprise. It is a tale of action on the planet Venus, in which event follows event at unparalleled speed. This is the fifth novel to appear in book form from the pen of the late Otis Adelbert Kline, an author whose work was quite similar to that of Edgar Rice Burroughs—and even surpassing it for swashbuckling swordplay and blood and thunder. The book has a striking dust wrapper and four interior illustrations by the famous artist J. Allen St. John. The latter did the illustrations for most of the early Burroughs books, and they are universally considered to be the finest drawings of their type in existence.

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The METAMORPHS

By S. J. Byrne

Here is a stary that will establish
"Stu" Byrne as ane af the giants af the
science fictian warld!
Here is truly great science fictian: it is ultra-
madern; it is up-ta-the-minute
in science advancement;
it is breathtaking in daring imaginative qualities;
it will challenge yaur thinking pracesses;
and it will, abave all
excite and entertain yau as no stary you have read
in recent years! It's great!

1: *A Quarantine For the Promised Land*

BENEATH the shell of consciousness, dreams and memory combined in Shahn's struggling mind. After two hundred years, he was stirring out of suspended animation . . .

* * * * *

Nrlan!

Graveless is Nrlan, world of the dead great past. It drifts a nebulous cold cloud of death and ashes down the shoreless sea - - emptiness where once were dreams and love and laughter - - and dark despair.

Beloved mate, wearer of my own scar of *san*, Sralna, she of the summer moons, who died in terror. San Dialnis, Valley of the Jansi Light. We walked together there, Sralna and I heedless of the *Change* . . .

Rospor, so tall and inhumanly thin, with his deep, dark eyes and glasslike nose - - standing there weaponless yet menacing and demanding.

Sralna, with only her sleeping robe, awakened by the intrusion. He hated the uninhibited gaze of Rospor.

"The *Khal* has entrusted you with the complete details. You must comprehend them, as you are his chief disciple. I want the *sarniall* weapon!"

"The weapon belongs to Vrulnus, *Khal* of Nrlan. You know it is the only hope of our kind against the Metamorphs." He placed a protecting arm about Sralna, his mate in *dialnis*.

"Nothing can stand in my way, Shahn. You will draw me the plans of the *sarniall* or suffer the consequences."

"You idiot! Even if I should prepare them, do you think you could escape the power of the *Khal*, who alone stands against the Metamorphs? If they do not fear him, why do they send you to me, instead? Go ask mighty Vrulnus, himself!"

"*I am not alone* . . " The strange note in his voice chilled them with the shock of its implication.

"Do you mean - - that you, a human serve *them*?"

"Yes, you fools! The only logical answer is to cooperate with the enemy! The Metamorphs depend on us for their continued existence as a species, since they evolve from us yet cannot reproduce. Can't you realize that our own power of procreation is the currency for bartering? In exchange for collaboration they will give power undreamed of. That is why I am commandeering one of your star ships tonight and taking off with a load of Metamorph chrysalides - - for the new world. They have assured me of the power to rule any planet, provided that I obtain the secret of the *sarniall*, and I intend to get it."

He leaped at Rospor and was met with a staggering hlow. Before he could recover, Sralna screamed. The room began to darken. Or rather, a *darkness* was taking shape in it - - a terrihle kind of darkness that tried to recall a suhliminal memory of deadly existence hefore the advent of humanity. Latent, pre-natal stimulus-response patterns took over in the presence of that materializing evil, and one tended to shrivel up and curl away from it, seeking the darkness of the egg in preference to life fraught with this incomprehensible terror. It robbed the mind of reason and will before the steam-roller impact of wild, shrieking fear. At first an amorphous shadow, it quickly assumed the proportions of a jet-black, faceless man - - a Metamorph!

Above Sralna's screams he could hear Rospor's laughter. "Hurry, Shahn, before it takes her life!"

The sheer madness of desperation threw him upon the shadowy thing, and his hands were numbed with cold when he tried to take hold of it and drag it from his mate. Color drained from her beautiful face along with the precious miracle force of life itself. And her hair! Visibly, it was turning ashen gray!

"Stop!" he cried out. "I'll do it!

I'll give you the plans - - anything!"

"No you won't!"

It was great Vrulnus, the *Khal,* himself, on the threshold - - Vrulnus, leader of the race, the single human force in the universe to oppose the nemesis. Ah, precious man! Only one *Khal* such as he may be born in a thousand generations. He stood there, towering above Rospor, his gray eyes ablaze with anger, the twin scar symbol of the *Khal* gleaming on his broad brow, in his hands a glowing *sarniall* - - the only completed one in existence. As he activated it, the room spun around - - and around . . .

To obliterate *them,* Nrlan was destroyed. Vrulnus had offered his people this terrible solution - - or the unspeakable alternative.

Thus the star ships. Year after year the flat, circular ships leapt interstellar chasms broader than life . . .

* * * * *

Shahn opened his eyes and focussed them at last upon reality. At first this reality consisted of a section of the ceiling, criss-crossed with conduits and airlines. Ingrained stimulus-response patterns struggled against conscious awareness. Mental defense mechanisms sought to reject the evidence of catastrophic events which lent truth to his tortured memories.

This could have been the ceiling of a subterranean apartment on Nrlan where they hibernated during perihelion near the solar reservoirs and the incubators - - while on the surface world the plants and trees folded in upon themselves and exuded a heat-resistant coating.

Soon the summer years would come, when they would emerge. He remembered the thousands of lakes and lagoons, the soaring mountains, the landlocked seas with their myriad islands - - and the four moons which governed their life - - the Moon of Jansi, under whose light only the generation of the procreators might walk - - especially in that land set apart for lovers, San Dialnis . . .

"Sralna!" he cried, sitting up suddenly and looking about him in the crypt-like ship.

Instead of Sralna, he saw the long row of hiber-bunks upon which the passengers lay. Grinning skulls stared back. The others had not survived the suspended animation.

They were dead, long gone with the memory of tragic Nrlan - - and Sralna.

Why had he alone survived? Was it that his people had seen in him their future *Khal,* in the event that Vrulnus should not come through? He had been laid here while yet unconscious. By whose careful hand had his body been prepared for the long, dark journey? Perhaps his beloved teacher, Vrulnus, himself. And now where was *he*?

Shock held him incapacitated for an unmeasured time while he sweated coldly, alone in the unknown abyss of Infinity. Where was he? - - and to what avail? Could even the genius of the *Khal,* himself, have penetrated the vastness of lifeless worlds and pinpointed their objective accurately - - and could his miraculous machine creations hold to such a tenuous orbit?

Yet the fact that he was conscious now gave proof that automatic relays were at work after all these years. Sensitive thermo-couples atop the low dome of the star ship had been activated by some nearing sun. Mere micro-amperes of current were creating magnetic fields in tiny solenoids which were tripping powered relays. The ship was awakening, too.

As the only surviving passenger, certain responsibilities now devolved upon him. He stirred himself, at last, and entered the observation dome. Through the leaded, polarized visiports he saw again the ponderous star-walls of the universe, but without Sralna this mighty symbol of the Immortal Plane assailed him again with an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Why not go out the airlock

and embrace oblivion?

Why not? Ah, there was the essence of the ageless dilemma! - - finite self versus the instinct of ethnic survival. This ship belonged to his race. It represented a part of the Exodus, a unit among thousands, but a precious symbol of their heroic bid for life. It had to complete its mission. There was work to be done.

Moreover, the haunting premonition pursued him - - that if Vrulnus had not come through, then he, as the great one's last living disciple, must become *Khal.* To him the survivors would look for guidance and salvation.

But no! Futile thought! Vrulnus was indestructible. He *must* have survived, and even now was taking charge of their new life in the promised land ahead. Shahn forced himself to hold to this and nothing more.

First of all, the tapes should be read. Probably for years now they had been recording occasional messages transmitted from the bases set up on the new world by the earlier arrivals from Nrlan. Owing to variations in velocity of the various ships over the long period of time required for the journey, it had been foreseen that some would arrive many years before the others. Since his own ship had been among the last to leave, he wondered how long the first to arrive had already been settled in the new world and what their transmitted reports would reveal.

But before he listened to the tapes he used the electronic telescope. The new world was the third planet of this chosen system. Even at this great distance he could make out its disc and detect the promising color of chlorophyl green and see the welcome white of suspended water vapor.

"*Ship* 763!" blared the speaker system, which was patched into the receiver circuit. "*Nrlani Base N-1 calling ship* 763. *If any survivors hear this, reply immediately!*"

He looked dumbly at the speaker. From that distant world he was looking at, one of the voices of his own kind had reached out through the abyss of space and addressed him.

"*Ship* 763!" The message was repeated, while Shahn marvelled at it. To hear someone else's voice, speaking to him in his native Nrlani tongue . . .!

He flicked a transmitter switch and answered. "Ship 763 to Base N-1. This is Shahn of Vrulnus Base. What are your instructions?"

There was an answering silence which puzzled him at first until he remembered that radio waves were limited to the velocity of light. At his present distance from the new planet it would require some time for his message to be received and a reply returned. So he busied himself with the tapes to learn what message of hope had been received out of this brave Tomorrow which his people had wrested from the calloused hand of Fate.

Yet, even as he permitted his resilient spirit this slight unfolding of optimistic wings they were suddenly clipped short. He had not wished to spin the tapes all the way back, so he had listened in at random and heard —

" . . *It has not been fully determined whether or not Rospor succeeded in reaching Earth. If he did land here and establish his Metamorphs, there is as yet no indication of it inasmuch as the Metamorphs thus far encountered on this planet may have come into being as the result of varying other circumstances, such as a failure to commit suicide before metamorphosis owing either to cowardice, amnesia - - or indeed that same degenerate lust for power which deviated Rospor from the course of human allegiance. Suffice it to say, our curse of old has been brought to this innocent world, and the responsibility develops wholly upon ourselves to - -* "

He shut it off abruptly and stared through a visiport at distant Earth. A

slight film of perspiration was on his skin. Lumps of muscles along his jaw tightened, and his deep-set black eyes gleamed bitter hate under heavy brows.

"Metamorphs!" he exclaimed, his voice almost breaking under the stress of his emotions.

After all the dangers and the torment, after the sacrifices and the antiseptic obliteration of a planet greater than Earth, *they* had gotten through to contaminate this last horizon of hope! And Rospor! He should have killed him that last night on Nrlan. Curse him and all his kind on Earth!

He lunged at the port, his hands spreading across its cold smoothness as though he would cup the Earth in his palms like a wounded bird. "Thanks to Ao!" he cried. "I am still young, and Vrulnus was my teacher! I'll fight! I'll track them down! I'll build a *sarniall!*"

The thought of Ao gave him pause. Strange, after the death of his world and at the end of this terrible journey, he should still cling to the thought of Ao.

When Nrlan was destroyed - - what of its moons? What of great, dark Gral, and the eternal light of Ao? - - that mystical entity which glowed always in the black disc of the farthest moon.

Legend had said many things of Ao. Vrulnus, the *Khal,* had intimated much more - - that it was even the secret of the greatness that once was Nrlan's prior to time-misted cataclysms of the buried past.

The thought that even this eternal thing was gone into the gulf of Yesterday accentuated his sense of futility. He sweated and raged silently within, as he gazed ahead at the innocent world to which his kind had brought a plague worse than death.

"Ship 763!" blared the speaker. His message was being answered. *"Base N-1 to ship 763 and operator Shahn of Vrulnus Base - - welcome to Earth! Long hos your arrival been awaited, Shahn. Stand by for course coordinates which will bring you to N-1. We have succeeded in keeping our presence a secret from the inhabitants, as originally planned, so entry into the atmosphere is required precisely over the base, itself . . "*

Shahn could not resist an emotional outburst. He flipped on the transmitter switch. "How do I know you're not a Metamorph?" he demanded.

Minutes later, the answer came back. *"You don't. But that goes both ways, doesn't it? Our base task force will intercept to make sure you land where we want you . . "*

Shahn hurled one more burning question. "The *Khal!"* he called. "Did *he* come through?"

After what seemed to be too long a wait, the reply returned, cold and factual.

"Vrulnus, *Khal* of Nrlan - - is dead . . . "

Shahn stood looking at the inanimate speaker as though it were alive. At last he clenched his fists and shouted, "It's a lie!"

But he suddenly thought it wise to say no more. Vrulnus, greatest of *Khals,* was indestructible. Surely he was there, hiding out for reasons of his own. And Shahn would find him.

If not - - and if Vrulnus were truly dead - - then by all the old laws *he* was *Khal.* If this latter were true, then he was no longer subject to their instructions.

A *Khal* must initiate his own plans if he were to guide his people . . .

2: *Contact*

CHARLES DALANEY opened the front door of his portentious home in the Hollywoodland Hills. And suddenly he regretted it. The rough looking character outside filled him with suspicion.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I am Shahn of Nrlan" was the simple reply - - and it was not in English.

Dalaney tried not to tremble or perspire or to faint from sudden vertigo. He struggled mightily to compose himself. From a black immensity deep as light years and centuries old came these words, blasting into his consciousness with staggering impact.

"I - - ah - - I'm afraid I don't - - "

"Cut it out, Menlor! Let me in. If you doubt my origin, there are always the *tests.*"

Shahn shouldered his way into the luxurious home, dark-visaged, bearded, lean and hungry. He held the collar of a worn coat against his throat. An old felt hat shaded his dark eyes.

"But - - it's incredible!" exclaimed Dalaney, closing the door reluctantly. "Two years ago you announced your presence while still in space. You never landed at the Mackenzie River Base."

"A good thing," muttered Shahn. "Base N-1 was wiped out by a Metamorph raid a few days *prior* to my arrival."

"By the Eternal! - - I did not know! Not N-1 Base, too!"

Shahn doffed his hat and a curly mop of black hair fell upon his brow. His eyes bored into the other's. "*Didn't* you know? I wonder, Menlor."

"Please - - the old names, the mother tongue - - we have eliminated them here."

"We? who is *we*? Vrulnus has disappeared. In his absence, *I* am *Khal.*"

"No *Khals,* my friend. All that is dead."

"We shall see. But just now - - let's have the tests."

Once the study door had been closed and locked, making the room soundproof, Dalaney finally managed a nervous smile.

"Won't you sit down? You look hungry. Maybe - - "

Shahn looked at Dalaney warily. "The tests," he insisted. "Remember?"

"Oh yes. The tests. Might as well get them over with."

Shahn's dark eyes narrowed sternly. "You may be a thirty year veteran here," he said, "but you're careless. What if I were - - "

"Don't worry!" Dalaney's soft looking face hardened and his eyes went cold. "*They* would never enter here. Your shirt, please."

Swiftly, Shahn removed his coat. Then he lifted up his shirt, exposing his abdomen. Dalaney looked and was reassured. His visitor had no navel.

"Plastic surgery," he remarked. "Doctor Lanis is our man. Now for the eyes."

He procured from his wall safe what appeared to be a small pen-light, while Shahn stuffed his shirt back in place. Then he pointed it at Shahn's unblinking eyes and turned it on.

It was as bright as a photographer's flood lamp and concentrated into a sustained pencil beam that would have blinded an ordinary pair of eyes for hours or perhaps days. Dalaney watched the pupils become pin-points, almost disappearing entirely before a thin, translucent inner lid slipped down over the cornea.

"As long as we're being so routine about this - - " He offered Shahn the test-light.

The other's mouth tensed. His eyes stared into Dalaney's. He fumbled hastily with the light and finally brought its piercing beam to bear. Instantly, Dalaney's pupils closed to pinpoints and the filmy inner lids appeared, which were characteristic of the Nrlani.

"Anything else?" asked Dalaney, patronizingly. "I could arrange the heat test to give conclusive evidence of the extra *purnial* gland, or give you a stethoscope so that you could tell my heart is in the center of my thorax, or give you a strength test or demonstrate our different sense of time. Or perhaps the high frequency test of the auditory. I have a signal generator. Now after all, Shahn - - "

Shahn's strong chin trembled. He

fumbled with the light, dropped it, then grasped Dalaney's face in both his hands and thrust his fingers into his eyes.

"What the hell!" Dalaney recoiled with a mercurial swiftness which would have been impossible for an Earthman, striking the other's arms away.

"I believe what I can *feel*!" shouted Shahn, suddenly overcome with rage and frustration. He clenched his fists and cried out through his teeth. "*They* are everywhere - - infesting the Earth with a plague worse than death! You *know* they have the upper hand by now - - so what was the use of everything we did!" He flung himself onto the leather divan, his face buried in his hands. *"Sangrulna diancas nal chiodun diniktla tlaliari!"*

"Shut up!" Dalaney snapped, coldly. Hastily, he went to his liquor cabinet and opened it. He probed at the back of it, up behind a drawer, and soon he extracted a small, black case.

The hypo served to settle Shahn's nerves to where Dalaney could reason with him.

"How many of your group came through?" he asked him, as he mixed two highballs.

Shahn straightened up on the divan and pulled himself together. His outburst had been one of frustrated strength rather than weakness. He looked around the room as though seeing it for the first time. One wall was all books, a flawlessly normal selection, from history and philosophy to sexual behavior and gardening.

"I was the only survivor," he answered.

Dalaney stopped mixing to look at him wonderingly. On his own ship, everybody had lived including his young wife.

"Don't look so surprised. It was almost twenty cycles of time - - two hundred Earth years. What do you expect?"

"You were - - with your mate?"

"No - -" sullenly. "You ought to remember the last days - - how we left Nrlan. We were lucky to be passengers at all. Who but the most fortunate could hope to he with his immediate family? But just look at the sacrifices, the tremendous accomplishments, the planning and hopes - - for *what!"*

Dalaney did not choose to answer. He came over and handed Shahn his drink. Then he sat down beside him and they seemed to share a common vision - - a golden nostalgia and a black revulsion . . .

After a long silence, Shahn laughed bitterly. "What did the Earthmen first call our ships when they saw them?"

"Flying saucers."

"No. That's understandable. But what were some of those other things?"

"You mean - - hallucinations, weather balloons, atmospheric reflections, beer bottle caps - - "

"Yes! That's it! By *Vrulnus!"* He deliberately emphasized the sacred name, pretending not to observe a flicker of what might have been dark resentment in Dalaney's eyes. "If they could only know the background of those ships! - - the terror and the striving and war and destruction and heartbreak! - - the incredible night of waiting, gliding in deathly sleep across the star roads, dreaming of survival only to smash against an unyielding barrier of futility!"

Dalaney studied his guest in calm deliberation. "And your own ship, Shahn? What did you do with it?"

Shahn's eyes searched Dalaney's cautiously. "I tried to hide it, but somebody got to it."

"Burned, eh?"

"Yes. *They* don't want our kind to escape them - - ever again. Each of us is a precious link with immortality - - for *them."*

"That's why the Nrlani are scattered and hard to find, Shahn. They are the constant prey of the Metamorphs, who must force them to procreate. If the Nrlanian species dies, so do they."

Shahn finally finished his drink and

got to his feet. He began pacing the room.

"Now to business," he said. "I have searched for you, Menlor, because you are the nephew of Vrulnus, and before N-1 Base was eliminated you were attached to it here as regional director for the West Coast area of the North American continent. You handled secondary orientation before things broke up and all Nrlani had to take cover. There are few I can trust in these latter days, but you I will *have* to trust."

"Shahn - - " Dalaney shook his head. "In the old world, you would have been *Khal*. Here - - forget it! The day of hope has passed. You have seen the newspapers and heard the commentators. Metamorphs have taken over public office in the guise of the favored leaders of Earth, and these poor Terrestrials don't know what's happening."

Shahn whirled about, his eyes blazing. "My people have not solved this problem - - therefore it is all the more evident they need their *Khal*!"

"And what would you do, Shahn - - if we hailed you as such?"

"Before considering that - - the question is, where is Vrulnus?"

Dalaney shrugged. "He is dead. You know the facts by now. He is reported to have landed at the Siberian base years ago, and the Metamorphs jumped him. He was destroyed, utterly."

"Did *you* see his body? Did *anyone?*"

Again, Dalaney shrugged. "You demand that we hope in the midst of darkness. Hope is too much of a burden, Shahn. We can only live our secret lives - - "

"In as much luxury as possible, eh?" Shahn interrupted. "You know, Menlor, *you're* not doing so badly! A splendid home, a nice manufacturing business, two cars, servants. You even have children."

Dalaney's face colored momentarily. "Under ordinary circumstances your deadly inferences would be a gross insult, Shahn, but I suppose it's natural that we should all be suspect until the proper association and passage of time develops confidence." He regained his composure and took Shahn's glass for a refill. "My children are adopted. My wife is Nrlanian, admittedly, but she has submitted to sterilization."

Shahn watched Dalaney in brooding silence. It was a silence which Dalaney sought to minimize by busying himself with the preparation of the highballs.

Finally, he returned to the divan with fresh drinks. "Let's get off these discussions for tonight," he said. "After a good supper and shower and shave, I want you to meet Doctor Lanis. When you are all fixed up, we can talk, in a few days, perhaps. What you should do for your own happiness is settle down, work for me, and - - perhaps raise a family."

"What are you talking about? No Earthwoman could conceive by a Nrlanian male."

"I'd find you a suitable Nrlani."

"But - - "

"I know. My own school of thought approves of avoiding the metamorphosis by not procreating at all. However, there is always the old way - - at the age of sixty or so . . "

"Sleeping powders or gunpowder. I know. That's the way that doesn't work. One puts it off until it's too late, and when the green sweat comes along, the instinct of self-preservation becomes accentuated. From then on, even before the chrysalis stage, one is committed to metamorphism. No - - this is not for me. I seek Vrulnus. He was working on a study of the metamorphosis. He told me that, given time and sufficient research, he might find a cure."

"I did not know that."

"There are many things you do not know - - but *I* do."

"Perhaps, Shahn, if you could build the *sarniall* - - you might yet be *Khal*."

Shahn smiled a cold, lean smile. "The

day I build it, my single bid for life will he gone. *They* know where I am. They leave me alone, waiting for me to put the *sarniall* together. They know the weapon is not the answer now - - not unless it is mass-produced and backed by an army. They would take it by force of numbers, and my value to them would have ceased. But the very possibility of the *sarniall* haunts them. Vrulnus conceived of it, and if I can build it, then someday someone else may do the same. They must figure out its principle so that they may invent a defense for it, and so they want the *sarniall,* and they wait for me to show my hand. The time is not yet ripe."

"And may never be," sighed Dalaney.

"What I want," growled Shahn, "is to find Vrulnus, or *Rospor!*"

Dalaney laughed. "Rospor is an equal legend. No trace of him was ever found."

"Don't be so gullihle. For all I know, he may be the false *Khal* of Earth by now!"

Dalaney looked away, examining his fingernails. He raised his brows. "And you would fight single-handedly against such forces?"

Shahn's eyes fixed Dalaney's with a cold stare. "The only thing that may be taken from me is my life. Sooner or later, I'll have to snuff that out, anyway, to avoid becoming a Metamorph. So until that time I'll risk every second of life to fight against Metamorphs *and* their collaborators - - and to find either Rospor, or Vrulnus, or both!"

"I see . . "

Shahn wondered just exactly what Dalaney meant, and the latter left the brief statement unqualified, as though it were self-explanatory, which it most definitely was not. In fact, Dalaney had tossed out a few cryptic remarks at the height of his emotions - - but Shahn figured they were boobytrapped and left them where they lay . . .

3: *Dialnis*

THE GIRL, who had once posed as a nightclub singer, had changed her name from *Nrlani* to Pearl Gordon. After three years of experience in Dr. Nimr Lanis' offices she had become an efficient receptionist and assistant. Shahn learned at the start of their acquaintance that she was of his own race. This was brought about by Dalaney's announcement to her concerning the nature of the operation.

"Navel," he had said, as though that could explain everything. Then he added, superfluously, "Plastic surgery."

"I understand," she answered, while sweeping a more than casual glance over the patient's face and figure.

"*How* do you understand?" Shahn demanded to know.

Her brown lashes lifted. She gave him a significant look as she poiñted to the ceiling with her ballpoint pen. "Have you forgotten the Light of Jansi so soon - - Shahn?" There was a sad amusement in the sly twist of her half smiling, half parted lips.

The regular light was out. An Earthman would have found himself in darkness here. A tube of the special light rested in the bottom of the bowl, shining through, filling the room with a light and a color unknown to Terrestrial eyes. It was also a very subtle light, engendering a series of delicate and personal thought associations. In the old world, two marriages were necessary for final confirmation of permanent matrimonial status. The first was Jansi, and under the Moon of Jansi Shahn and Sralna had achieved the miracle of *dialnis,* which is mental rapport - - a unity of being. Once *dialnis* was reached, the second and final marriage was consummated. It was then the female wore the sacred scar of *san.*

Coming into a room illuminated only by this source of light was a perfect test and a proof that everyone ahle to see was Nrlanian. But it could also be a trap sometime or somewhere in the future, because the owner of the trap could he a Metamorph, a black, faceless, in-

human fiend, hypnotizing him, making him believe that he was looking at a normal man, or a personal friend. That was why he had lunged at Dalaney and *felt* of his eyes, back there in his study.

But Metamorphs never tried to make any normal man think he was looking at a young girl of Pearl Gordon's obvious attractions. They could not transmit the illusion of that exciting psychological interchange in look and manner which was as unknown to them as were rainbows to. blindmen or the patter of rain to the deaf.

"I was of the Lanlai," the girl explained. "Under the influence of the Moon of Lanlai I dreamed, as a girl, of entering the time of Jansi." She reddened slightly, watching him. Or was she testing him? To a Nrlanian it was very frank conversation, as the Jansi generation were the procreators of the race. "Strange," she hastened to add, "that I should enjoy the Light of Jansi only under such synthetic conditions - - here in the presence of the great Shahn, himself."

Shahn was forced to become more aware of the girl, since she had touched upon such a personal subject. She was young and had soft wavy brown hair and large, subtle brown eyes. She was lithe without tallness, stylish without severity, and intelligent without complacency. Moreover, her lips were as feminine as her smile was comprehensive. And she was a Nrlani.

"Shahn," said Dalaney, at his sboulder, "this is Doctor Lanis."

Somewhat in a daze because of the girl, Shahn found himself looking at a very friendly man with a black goatee and a bald head. His light blue eyes were the most disarming part about bim.

"Welcome to Earth, Shahn!" said Doctor Lanis, with surprising heartiness. "I'll have you disguised in no time so that you could pass a Terrestrial medical examination anywhere."

As the two older men led him into another section of the suite of offices where there was standard incandescent illumination, Shahn took another quick look at Pearl Gordon, who still sat at the receptionist's desk, doing nothing at the moment. Unless he could construe her pensive surveillance of his departing figure as being strictly in the line of duty. She did not often see a newly arrived *young* Nrlanian male.

One thing he knew for sure. Nrlanian women were not any different from Earth women when it came to instinct, and the most basic instinct was procreation. Here, after the long, cold ride, with their home world destroyed, young and unsterilized Nrlanian women could be irresistibly attracted to a healthy male of their own species, for they could conceive by none other. Yet that very instinct was being outlawed because the curse of mutation must die.

The Metamorphs must die!

Even if young love and a woman's instinct must be violated, death to the accursed enemy came first - - if the secondary matter of life, love and the pursuit of happiness were to become anything more than a long lost dream . . .

* * * * *

It was one of those little Italian places, Western style, with knotty pine paneling, a log fire, checkerboard tablecloths, candle light, martinis and pizzas. The small dance orchestra was taking a recess, as were most of the waiters, inasmuch as only three tables were occupied. This being a resort town, and the month being May, the first wave of the tourist season was expected momentarily.

"It isn't like home," said Shahn, "but it's a fair substitute, I think, considering the circumstances."

He was looking between two candlesticks at Pearl. She had a persistent way of looking at him from under her lashes, and he was haunted by the thought that she was witholding something from him, because she was anything but demure. She was too sharply intelligent, too ex-

hilaratingly frank, to be diffident or shy. It was as though she were parrying or avoiding something by repartee and mannerism that she hoped he would never discover.

"It was a wonderful thing for me that Mr. Dalaney and the Doctor finally influenced you to give up a hopeless struggle and settle down to a normal existence." She paused, then asked, "Are you happy?"

"It is the customary thing for me to ask *you*," he answered. "Sweetness, don't laugh at me. I know it may seem silly, since we weren't able to marry in our own way, to even imitate the process here. In fact, all Earth marriages are merely equivalent to our first stage of matrimony."

"The Jansi stage," she murmured sadly. "And here there can never be the final stage. Not *dialnis*. I could never wear your scar of *san*."

He smiled. "You can't go around wearing the *san* on Earth. On Nrlan the *san* would be considered a beautiful and enviable symbol of permanent attachment, but here your unsuspecting terrestrial acquaintances would ask you what hit you between the eyes to make such a peculiarly symmetrical scar."

"John - - " She pronounced his assumed name softly, as a compromise with reality, so that it almost sounded like *Shahn*. "Why did you rush so - - into this marriage?"

"I saw no reason for waiting. Here you were, and here was I. There is a lot of loneliness and a long, dark night of memory to wash away."

"Seriously - - was it rebound? I mean - - you told me about - - "

"Get off that, Pearl! You know it wasn't that!"

"Well, how about this one, then? Our racial situation here constricts life. Is this quick marriage a form of - - rebellion?"

"Say! What is this? After all, there may be a much simpler explanation. I want you to be happy."

She reached out and took hold of his hand. "Of course I'm happy," she said, smiling. "At least there is one parallel between this and Nrlan. They have honeymoons here, which is not too different in its meaning from our Valley of San Dialnis."

The fact that *San Dialnis* had no really adequate translation made him moody. You had to have the racial memory and peculiar stimulus-response pattern of the Nrlani to grasp its true significance. In an attempt to capture the spirit of this lover's hegira of his own world, he had insisted that they take a two week honeymoon, and it had landed them in the Russian River country of Northern California.

"We shall speak here neither of the future nor of the past," he told her, lifting his glass.

As they looked at each other, their smiles slowly faded.

"Oh John!" she exclaimed, searching his eyes. "I'm glad you're happy. Terribly glad!"

"Say! What's all this concern about *my* happiness? What about you?"

She turned her head abruptly to look at a crowd of tourists coming in the door, and at the musicians returning to their stand. Then she looked back at him with a peculiar little smile.

"Let's call for those pizzas. I'm starved!"

They drove down the highway toward the sea, high above the river valley. There was a high concentration of cirrostratus that cast a fairy scrim of enchantment across the apparently racing moon. Isolated stands of pine stood out on the great slopes, limned with dull platinum, and nobody seemed to inhabit the world but they. It was an old, old world, sad and beautiful with myriad memories of unnumbered lovers who had seen and loved it.

"The Valley of San Dialnis," Shahn muttered. "We only need a temple or

two up on the hills to make it real."

He bad parked the car on a tremendous bluff above the sea, and they could look back at the delta of the Russian River and a curving expanse of its course beyond, where it came out of the forested bills. A soft, steady wind from the ocean pressed against them, just cool enough to remind them this was night. It tossed part of Pearl's brown hair across one side of her face as she took hold of Shahn's hand and surveyed the moon-washed scene in silence.

"You have been there," she said, finally, "but I have not. What happened to your mate? - - your first one - - you told me so little . . "

He filled bis lungs with the invigorating air and was silent for a while. Then he answered, "What happened on the other side of time and space should be forgotten."

"I'm sorry . . " Her hand pressed his, remorsefully.

"She died," he added, unexpectedly. "On Nrlan. That's all far away and - - "

"All right!" she exclaimed softly. "I made a booboo. Let's forget it!" She kissed him lightly on the cheek and pulled him toward the edge of the bluff that looked out over the sea.

The sea fanned out away from them, blending imperceptibly into the darkness of the sky like a titanic launching ramp that pointed into the bottomless void of the universe. Nowhere could they turn without sensing the heaviness of their racial memories. The awareness, deep down in their minds, that their kind was rare, like a few grains of sand blown into the infinite deserts of space, drew them irresistibly to each other.

"Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink!" Shahn muttered.

She looked up at him. "Rather incongruous, to say the least."

"It's what the shipwrecked mariner is supposed to exclaim. It's equivalent translation into Nrlanian would be, I think - - " He spoke slowly in their own tongue, saying, "A haven of life lies here at the end of the terrible journey, and we have found it - - but to die!"

"Shahn!" Her arms went about him in a swift, desperate movement, ber head pressed tightly against his chest.

He held her to him in a crushing grip, glaring out over her shoulder at the trackless sea. "All this cannot be!" he cried. "Our race - - the glories and the power of Nrlan - - the golden age of the *Khals!* Why do I yield to such an impossible circumstance when my blood cries out for retribution? - - when every fibre of my being shouts: Strike back! - - call your people to arms! Without their *Khal* - - they die!"

She kissed him on the mouth to quiet him. "You are my *Khal,*" she said consolingly.

With a fierce abandon, he suddenly enfolded her deep in bis arms and kissed her hair, then lifted up her face to his and found her lips again. She responded with a feverish haste, as though their passion were a clandestine, forbidden thing that was soon to be barred from them forever.

"Did anyone ever tell you, Sbahn of Nrlan," she whispered tensely, between her teeth, "that you are a very fatal man? Your magnetism is a *sarniall* no woman could resist!"

* * * * *

Later, they discovered a path which led them to a grass-grown ledge under the shoulder of the bluff. The ledge faced the ocean, and beyond its rim a cliff dropped almost perpendicularly into the faintly roaring surf two hundred feet below. The moon was just finding the ledge, and they knew that it would be almost morning before it sank beyond the sea. They sat there wordlessly for a quarter of an hour before Shahn broke the silence.

"Have you ever beard any news concerning Vrulnus?" he asked.

The mention of this great name pulled her abruptly out of her subjectivity, and

she turned to look up into his eyes. "No one knows if he lives," she said.

"In him alone is our only hope for survival. I wish I knew his whereabouts or the Earth name he assumed."

"How can you be sure he has not been victimized by the Metamorphs already, as Mr. Dalaney claims?"

"To believe that he lives is mental defense. To abandon all hope would leave nothing but the void of insanity."

"Shahn," said Pearl. "Tonight - - the subject is morbid. Do you mind?"

He kissed her and she clung to him again with that indefinable desperation she had demonstrated before. The moon reached its zenith and still found them there on the ledge, long after conversation had failed them as an adequate means of expression.

I am closer to you than I have ever been

We are one, you and I

"*Shahn!*" She sat up and looked at him as though she were going to scream.

"Of course," he replied calmly. "What else is it? What else could it be?"

"*Dialnis!*" she exclaimed. "I have experienced *dialnis* - - in this far world - - and with you! - - oh Shahn!"

He tried to hold her again, but she shook her head, suddenly bursting into tears and pushing him with her hands against his chest.

"I had begun to fear it would happen!" she cried. "But I needed you so - - I thought I dared take the chance. It was only rebound for you, I thought, and for me - - "

He held her at arm's length and looked at her face. "What do you mean - - you *thought* you dared take the chance?" he asked her, fiercely.

"I'm their decoy!" she exclaimed bitterly. "Dalaney is a collaborator, and Doctor Lanis is a - - you know what!"

Shahn looked at his hands, clutching her arms, and wondered at them. They seemed not to be his. He was of stone - - suddenly cold and devoid of nerves. Petrified.

Then, with almost invisible swiftness of motion, he was on his feet, and she with him, his fingers digging into her flesh. "That - - cherubic, red-cheeked little blue-eyed man - - Lanis - a Metamorph!" He shook her. "You! His instrument!"

"Yes! Yes!" she cried, completely out of control now, her face streaked with a flood of tears, her hair in her eyes. "He maintains one of the major incubators under special acceleration. Oh Shahn! Shahn! Forgive me! You are the first one to bring *dialnis*! - - I had hoped against it!"

"How many others!" he shouted - - "Tell me!" His eyes impaled her with almost murderous intent. No wonder, he thought, that Dalaney had not resisted their marriage plans and Lanis had been so merrily enthusiastic!

"Dozens, out of his office, but they were just - - "

"I know! I know! Skip it! Skip everything! I should kill you! Why have you become - - this *thing* that you are! A prostitute, all right! But not the egg-breeding instrument of a - - of a - - "

"Don't you *know*, Shahn?" she sobbed. "They have their eyes on you as their most dangerous enemy and biggest prize, next to Vrulnus. They know you are next to be *Khal* - - but they wanted to tie you down, with myself as the instrument of barter! I could tell you other reasons for this - - there are dozens of girls - - all Nrlani - - doing the same thing on the West Coast, for Lanis' incubation center. Call it mental coercion - - weakness, hopelessness - - the line of least resistance - - but I don't care to excuse myself - - not with you! Oh Shahn! *Dialnis!* I never expected it, but you - - "

"Shut up!" He slapped her face, several times, hard. "Do you know what I

am going to do? I'm going back to kill Dalaney, and then I'm going to assemble a *sarniall* - - yes, that's what I said! The weapon of Vrulnus! I am going to destroy Lanis' chrysallis and any others that may be lying around! And you're going to show me where he's got his buried!"

She broke free. Before he could stop her she was over the ledge. He saw her go, diminishing moonlit figure, plunging irretrievably toward the pounding surf and the barnacle encrusted rocks.

He stood there looking down. The moon moved in the heavens while he stood there, eyes and mouth very dry, totally alone.

Perhaps he could have spared this young girl's life, he thought bitterly, if he had told her the truth - - that he had sacrificed her to an inconsequential Jansi marriage as a ruse to gain her confidence - - that he had recognized her as the weakest link in Dalaney's chain of collaboration - - that the real prize obtained was the unexpected knowledge tbat Lanis was a true Metamorph.

As for her experience of *dialnis* - - he had also neglected to tell her that Vrulnus had taught him the rudiments of telepathy.

He shuddered, depressed and overwhelmed witb remorse and loneliness. She bad been so beautiful, so young - -

4: *Hideout*

SHAHN crumpled up his last available cigarette in an ashtray. He had been smoking too much - - getting the dry hack in his throat. Coffee, cigarettes, sleepless nights - - long months of uncertainty, battling against time and the handicap of not having either references or credentials, living in remorse over the avoidable death of Pearl Gordon, and eating and breathing a mind-ravening rage and hate.

From tbis single window of his improvised lah he could look out between giant wharf sheds at a slice of San Francisco and see the tugs and lumber boats moving out under the mist-shrouded span of the Bay Bridge - - all the peaceful activity of terrestrial life which was as yet totally unaware of this invisible invasion of forces beyond its control - - and his own control, as well.

But he had to fight, in the very teeth of futility. He had to build the *sarniall* before returning lone-handed to Dalaney and "Doctor" Lanis in Los Angeles. The construction of the deadly weapon required money which, at long last, was finally coming in. But there was the rub. To obtain it, he had found it necessary to donate to Earth a forbidden piece of Nrlanian science.

And this shortened his available time, because *they* could now trace him down through the patents applied for by his customer. They would be waiting for him to show his hand like this - - any revolutionary piece of science in the world, a suspicious event, a single clue that might lead to their prize. Sooner or later - -

Abruptly, someone knocked at the door . . . .

He tensed mercurially, turning swiftly to glare at it. The landlord never visited this property. No one else knew he was here, since he came or left the premises solely by night. The only mail he ever anticipated - - royalty checks sent to him by the Jonathan Corporation people whom he had benefitted - - was sent to a post-office box. *No one* had his address. This could not be a salesman knocking - - not inside the closed warehouse at the private door of his lah.

Whoever was out there had come specifically to see *him*.

"Who is it?" he asked, finally, his pulse racing.

There was no reply. Only the weather-cracked, barren door facing him in enigmatic silence.

He grasped one end of a worn tarpaulin and threw it over the gleaming articles on his work-beoch - - precious

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parts of the *sarniall.* He wished to Ao that he had it finished.

The knock was repeated, gently, but with obvious determination and a cunning patience.

Shahn stood still in the center of the room, looking at the door, frowning at the insistent pounding of his heart. Had they found him so soon? - - Dalaney or his dark master? Or was this an agent from some more important center come to take him captive?

He ran to his desk and procured an old automatic that he had brought from a fence. Thrusting it into his belt, he threw on his coat and went to the door. Eyes gleaming defiance, he took hold of the knob. They'd not take him alive - - not even Lanis, himself!

Violently, he swung it open . . .

"Good heavens!"

The soft, almost musical tone of the voice matched the face and personality of the chic young brunette who stood outside. Her clear, blue eyes were wide with astonishment - - her expressive young lips parted in alarm. Then he noticed her hair, raven black, darkly glistening, and copiously long, partly lying across one neatly padded shoulder. She carried a blue leather draw-string purse to match her smartly tailored powder blue suit, and a dog-eared notebook. He also caught a glimpse of long, cool nylons and slim, wedge-heeled shoes before he found his wits - - and his voice.

"I - - ah - - beg your pardon. Just kicked a salesman out of here. Thought he had come back."

"Oh." Those gigantic blue eyes! Not dumb, either. They didn't penetrate - - they absorbed!

"Ah - - what I mean - - were you looking for someone? How did you get in here?"

"Through the door." Those lips were worth a thousand words, expressing three compounded innuendos at a flash. When he offered her nothing in return, she said, "I hope you are Anthony Meade."

This was his new alias. But - - "How the devil - - "

"The *Press* has its own peculiar ways of uncovering a story, Mr. Meade," she said quickly, with a perfect admixture of politeness and self-assurance. "I'm from the Star-Express. May I come in a moment?" She flashed a laminated plastic I.D. card at him.

He read the card laboriously, momentarily deprived of his native eidetic faculty of reading pages at a glance. "What story are you talking about? I'm afraid I - - "

The girl tilted back her head and laughed so genuinely that it brought a faint smile of response to Shahn's dry lips. "Story!" she exclaimed. "You are the inventor of the high-voltage storage battery and you can ask such a question? Why Mr. Meade - - you must know you've made technological history! Did you think for a minute that you could hide from your grateful public?"

The Press! Why hadn't he considered this contingency, written a limited secrecy clause in the contract? What if he told her the *real* story? Well - - the main point was to give her the brush, as they so aptly put it in English. That white marble perfection of a nose she was wearing could make history, too - - the wrong kind - - if she persisted in sticking it into *this* business!

She came in, cool morning blue, a breath of fresh air and a rainbow flash of healthy intellect, and she stood there in the middle of his lab - - and in the middle of his desolate life.

An Earth girl, the most beautiful terrestrial female he had ever seen. Smiling at him, gazing unabashed at the evidence of his bachelor existence - - the dirty dishes in the sink, his unsorted laundry on the cot, yesterday's newspapers on the floor, cigarette stubs camouflaging ashtrays.

Suddenly, he was laughing. It was more nervous reaction than genuine amusement. What a contrast *this* was to

all his dark forebodings of a moment before!

But the girl wasn't laughing. She was looking gravely at the gun in his belt which he had inadvertently exposed to view.

"Don't get any ideas about that," he told her quickly, taking it out and placing it carelessly on his desk in front of the window. "I help pay for my keep here by being a watchman."

Her eyes and her expressive mouth told him she had observed that the warehouse was empty - - practically abandoned - - but she said nothing. Instead, she walked over to his chair beside the desk and sat down, inevitably crossing her slim legs as she did so. Shahn wondered why Nrlanian women had never discovered nylons - - one of the most intriguing and ingenious inventions in the universe.

"I'll ask you a question first," he said.

"Yes?" She smiled attentively.

"I'm curious. How is it a young woman of your obvious attractions has the courage to come to a place like this - - an empty warehouse on the waterfront - - to interview a strange man, alone? I do read newspapers once in a while, you know."

"But the wrong headlines," she countered, easily. "You're not a tramp, Mr. Meade. You are an accomplished scientist - - and my friends at the Jonathan Corporation told me about you. I think - - any aggression on your part would be directed at something much more significant than a mere female. Now, shall we get on with the interview?"

Insight or coincidence? His aggressiveness *was* being concentrated on something far more significant.

"You - - have friends in the Jonathan Corporation?"

"I get around. I'm science editor for the Star-Express."

"But they haven't my address here."

"You visit your post-office box every Friday evening. That's enough of a lead for us professional snoopers. Now tell me, Mr. Meade - - "

"Your I.D. says your name is Lillian - - Lillian Hammer."

"So?"

"Miss Hammer - - there can be no interview - - not at this time."

She looked away, out at what could be seen of the Bay. Then she turned her head quickly, impaling him with a determined glare. "Mr. Meade, history has an inevitable way of being written. If it isn't me there'll be a long line of others. So why not get it over with? My paper feels its readers would like to know more about you. Do you know who you are? You're James Watt. You have just invented the steam-engine and the Industrial Revolution is around the corner. Why, that battery of yours will make internal combustion engines obsolete! It's even the death-knell to smog - - and you deny me an interview!"

He smiled. "You omit the fact that such a battery is what the atomic age has been waiting for, also, but - - please don't think I'm trying to be coy about all this. Incidentally, how about panhandling a cigarette? I'm fresh out." He sat down on one edge of the desk, leaning over her, aware of a deliciously elusive perfume.

She reached into her purse, but her eyes never left his face. She offered him a silver cigarette case and he helped himself to a Viceroy.

"You're not the coy type," she answered, "and I'm not trying to be facetious. The battery is story enough, but what I'm really trying to get at is something else now."

He exhaled a pale blue smokescreen, but she penetrated it, still studying his face. "And that is?" he queried.

"It's - - it's indefinable, but it's there. In the first place, if you'll pardon me, I don't think your real name is Meade - - "

"Why not?"

"Your descent, whatever it may be,

is not related to such a name. I'm no anthropologist, but I can pick out obvious racial types - - Spanish, East Indian, Slavic . . . You have the facial characteristics of a Valentino, yet you're not Italian. You have a touch of the Western Hemisphere Indian, and yet that's not it, either. There's a touch of the exotic, a sort of out of this world look - - and there's such a sad loneliness in you, like the result of some great tragedy - - and there's some tremendous emotion motivating you. I wish I knew your *real* story, Mr. Meade, or Mr. Jones, or whatever your aliases are . . . "

"Miss Hammer, you're in the wrong business. You should be telling fortunes." He did not smile.

Neither did she. Her eyes still concentrated on his. "You mean in this case I struck pretty close to home."

He got up and started pacing the room. "I'm sorry, Miss Hammer. This is getting both of us nowhere. For purely selfish professional reasons I find it necessary to maintain the greatest secrecy about myself at this time."

"In other words, to publish details about you would perhaps - - *endanger* you or your plans?"

He whirled about, his face taut. Then he relaxed into a controlled smile. "Let it go at that. I wish I could help you out but I can't. The matter is purely one of professional caution and not at all as bizarre as you imagine."

She looked briefly at the gun resting near her elbow, then back at him. Suddenly, she smiled and got up. "You win this round," she said, "under one condition."

"And that is?"

"Let me wash the dishes."

"Let you - - " He looked at the untidy sink, then back at her, his heavy brows coming together in puzzlement. "But I don't get it!"

Before he could stop her, she had wrapped a dishtowel about her slim waist. Her sleeves went up and she was at it, peculiarly silent and industrious about it all.

Dumbfounded but curious, Shahn sat down in his chair to watch her. After a while, he said, "What kind of charity do you call this?"

She removed the towel and began drying the glasses and cups briskly. Finally, she looked his way, a strange little smile on her lips. "Maybe I wouldn't be able to explain it to myself," she answered, "except that - - something tells me strongly that you need help. I don't know how to help you. I wish I did."

She finished quickly, stacking the dishes neatly on the sink. She pulled down her sleeves, gave her hair a characteristically feminine adjustment, and came over to the desk for her purse and notebook.

"Thanks," he said, simply, not getting up.

She paused to look at him. "Is there anything - - " she began. "I mean, my paper would - - "

"Nothing." He shook his head, smiling.

"Could I come back again sometime?"

"As long as you keep me a secret."

"I have a feeling you won't be staying here long."

"Perhaps not."

She backed away slowly. "Well, goodbye, Mr. Meade. Thanks anyway."

"Thank *you*."

She turned, then, swiftly, and was gone . . .

Shahn sat there motionlessly, looking at the empty doorway. He knew that neither of them could explain why she had washed the dishes - - and a lot of other things too far out on the horizon of comprehension to be defined.

He watched the Star-Express carefully after that, and although he found Lillian Hammer's science column he could discover no betrayal of confidence. Jonathan Corporation was organizing publicity for release as soon as they could

swing into mass production on the high-voltage battery, but be knew that by that time be would be ready to strike in Los Angeles. Work on the *sarniall* progressed rapidly now that money was coming in from royalties on advance contracts which Jonathan had obtained by means of well placed confidential correspondence, particularly with the U. S. Government.

In the midst of his fevered work, one persistent thought had aged him mentally and added a few outward lines of care to his already drawn face. He had previously fixed Vrulnus in his mind as his goal - - but of late a new thought bad inserted itself with increasing insistence. *What if Vrulnus were truly dead?*

This possibility presented him with a very pointed fact, like the sword of Truth pressed against bis heart. He, Shahn, chief disciple of Vrulnus, would then be the only last living hope of his kind!

To place the burden of hope on another such as Vrulnus had been a relief - - but when he considered that he might actually be carrying upon himself, alone, the entire burden of responsibility for his race, owing to the teachings of Vrulnus, it weighed him down to wbere his only relief was in his relentless toil.

But he refused to believe Vrulnus was not alive . . .

Then, early one evening while he was deeply engrossed in a delicate problem in what Vrulnus had called nuclearstatics, *she* came back. He recognized her knock, gentle but firm, patient but persistent.

With a frown, he covered his work and opened the door, and at sight of her the frown evaporated. It didn't have a chance. On tbe previous occasion the tailor made suit had emphasized cool efficiency. Now, under a light gray coat she wore a taffeta skirt that emphasized a number twenty-four waist and a sheer, white blouse that was but strictly feminine. Unfailingly, her black hair and frank, blue eyes reaffirmed the seeming miracle of her freshness and beauty.

She held out a smooth, unadorned hand and there was nothing to do but to take it in his as she swept into the room.

"I was in the neighborbood and thought I'd see if you were still at the hermitage." Her eyes swept the room, observing much of tbe same as before - - an unmade bed, newspapers on the desk and chair, and dirty dishes in the sink. At sight of the latter, she dimpled at the corners of her delicate mouth, coloring slightly.

He smiled wanly as he released her hand. "I'm not going to be here much longer. My work is nearing completion." Involuntarily, he glanced at the tarpaulin, and her eyes followed bis gaze. She studied the mysteriously covered lab bench curiously.

"Ah - Miss Hammer, I can appreciate your professional interest in what may appear to you to be the makings of a sensational news story - - my invention, my secrecy and melodramatic seclusion in an old warebouse, and so fortb - - but I assure you the facts behind all this are quite dull. I am also quite urgently pressed for time and furthermore I still think you should not be running around in this neighborhood alone - - particularly at night. You're too attractive a young woman - - "

She laughed, showing even white teeth which accentuated the perfection of her lips. "I didn't know I could penetrate your guard," she said. "You *are* wearing a guard, you know . . "

"You mean - - against women?" In his mind be meant terrestrial women.

She nodded merrily, and the dimples were back. "You're wearing enougb armor for a whole Panzer division, and it's quite unnecessary. You see - - in one respect I'm an old-fashioned girl. In spite of certain biological susceptibilities of the animal kingdom I am bridging the difference between the sexes with an ordinary, non-biological brand of friendship. Look!" She held up both hands.

"No notebook. I actually dropped by to find out when you had remembered to eat last."

"Come to think of it, I only had breakfast, but - - "

"There! You see? Now I was going to trap you into taking me to dinner, but since you're so busy we can make it hamburgers. There's a stand just three blocks from here."

"Now look here - - !"

* * * * * *

It led to more than hamburgers. There were other visits that he welcomed in spite of his anxieties. Somehow, she lightened his burden. When his mind became stale from the pressure of his calculations and experiments, she regenerated him with her frankness and apparently genuine friendsbip.

"Of course," he told ber one night, "your main objective is the *story* you think lies behind me."

They walked slowly through a dimly lit park near the waterfront. With a characteristic lack of inhibition, she tucked her arm through his.

"For the record," she said, "you're potentially big news. When you tie a woman's intuition in with a reporter's nose, you have a bloodhound that won't quit, Anthony. But aside from all that - - the same intuition leads me to believe that you're a very nice person, down underneath all your cloaks and daggers. I *feel* your need for a friend."

"Is this a frustrated mother complex, Lillian?"

"Ungrateful wretch!" She laughed, tossing her head so that he caught the perfume of her hair.

Suddenly, Shahn tensed. She felt it and paused, looking up into his face. She saw a man with a look of desperation in his eyes, accompanied by an almost kingly expression of terrible wrath. Looking behind them into the shadows between the trees, he seemed to be ready to strike a death blow at hidden enemies. She felt the poised, menacing power of him.

"What is it?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain calm.

He turned, pulling her with him as he quickened their pace. "I thought - - we were being followed."

"Anthony, you wanted me to think your situation was dull and prosaic. I didn't helieve you, but - - are you really in such danger? I saw the look in your eyes."

"I'm all right. I just want to keep *you* out of all this. Come on!"

"I can't keep up with you!"

"Sorry."

They reached a streetlight on a corner. Lillian looked back at the shadowy walkway in the park, mystified and not a little frightened.

"Do you really think - - "

"I've been expecting it. It may be my overwrought nerves, but for several days now I've had the presentiment that - - well - - " He looked down at her and smiled, cynically. "That things were - - closing in . . "

"Anthony!" she pleaded. "Why can't you share this burden? Can't I be trusted - - even now?" Her cool hand pressed his, coaxingly. "You know I can get you help and protection if you want it."

"Let's get off the streets," he answered. "Do you know of a secluded place - - close?"

"Only one. Come with me."

They hurried down two short blocks and reached a type of building he had only read about but never entered. The dimly illuminated sign beside the worn concrete steps read: *Saint Anthony Church.*

He watched the Earthwoman closely as she dipped her hand into the holy water and made the sign of the cross. When she led him down the dim aisle between the empty pews and kneeled, he looked up at the candle-lit altar and took in the poignant beauty of dying roses and lilies, the beatific expressions of the Christ and Virgin Mary.

So this was where they practiced their

mysterious faith in an extended life beyond the flesh. On Nrlan it was different.

He followed her into the pew and kneeled beside her, looking back at the church door as he did so.

"The church of your patron saint," she whispered. Then she crossed herself and bowed her head, while he looked again at the altar.

On Nrlan, only Ao was eternal. And what was Ao? He wished he knew. Here before him was the apparent basis for certain enduring qualities of the terrestrial tribe. They believed in a sort of duality - - one part being extended beyond the lifespan of the mortal body.

What a thing to believe! If that were true, then what was death? A sort of - - of metamorphosis!

He shuddered. No! Better oblivion than to be thrust into some nameless existence beyond the grave!

Suddenly, he was aware that the girl was studying his face.

"Are you a Communist?" she asked, abruptly.

He smiled faintly. "If I am - - this is a sly trick of yours - - bringing me in here."

Her face fell. "I boped you were not."

"Well - - I'm not."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I knew it!" she whispered. "You couldn't be."

"Why not?"

Her brows contracted in puzzlement. "Please don't be patronizing, Anthony. What is your religion?"

"I have none."

Again, her frown of puzzlement. "Atheist?"

"Not deliberately - - rather more by circumstance." Shahn squirmed mentally. This whispered discussion in an empty church could trap him into revelations he was not ready to make. "I - ah - I'm a scientist, that's all." He smiled. "Not very conversant with the *mystical* aspects of the universe. To me there is nothing supernatural."

"Including the soul?" she argued.

"Now *that* is the most interesting philosophical concept I have found - - " He paused, warily, trying to rephrase his thought. "I mean - - it's so paradoxical. You people claim that you believe in this duality, yet you do very little about it."

"I don't understand."

"Well - - it's quite simple. A thing is - - or it is not. If you have a soul which in your conception is indestructible, then why fear death? Yet you fear it. If you really lead a dual existence, then why leave such a marvelous subject in the realm of mysticism and alchemy? Bring it up to date as a scientific fact! If it is in actuality an interlocked subnuclear energy-mass field - - "

"An interlocked *what* - - ?" She was staring at him in confused amazement.

He almost bit his lip. "I'm sorry," he said, looking back at the door of the church. "Lillian, perhaps it's all right now to leave."

She saddened. "I take it - - you do not approve of religion."

"On the contrary," he answered, getting up. "*Blind* faith is an excellent substitute for the facts, until the facts can be comprehended."

She kneeled hastily in the aisle, crossed herself, then hurried outside ahead of him. She paused on the steps to face him as he came out, his dark eyes searching the shadows of the night.

"Anthony," she said, "I don't know whether you are a sincere genius or an intellectual snob." She smiled softly at him. "Yet somehow I'm not sorry I brought you here."

He took her arm, saying nothing. But he thought: Sub-nuclear mass-energy. It *could* be possible. Interlocked matter - - gross matter plus a counter-balancing infra-pattern - - a sub-harmonic, or was gross matter a higher harmonic of the lower energy pattern? Vrulnus would know. He taught that matter was energy; energy is vibration. All manifestations of matter are either harmonics or discords. If only - -

"Anthony - - what are you thinking?"

"I wish I had a soul."

She stopped, her mouth agape, eyes wide. "What a horrible thing to say! Of *course* you have a soul!"

He smiled. "Have I? If I did, do you know what I would do with it?"

"No."

"I'd photograph it."

Her chin set stubbornly. "Anthony Meade, *I* have a soul - - and if you're so smart, you have my permission to photograph it to your heart's content!"

He guided her along the street toward the warehouse. "It would be an interesting experiment," he remarked.

* * * * * *

Shahn tried hard to shut Lillian Hammer out of his life, but always in the depths of subnuclear physics he was confronted with the subtler mechanics of a persistently infectuous pair of blue eyes.

"Damn it!" he would exclaim. "She is an Earthwoman! I don't care *how* lonely it is!"

And lonely it was, desperately lonely in a world occupied by several billion people.

Something told him that Lillian Hammer was going to be more than a friend. He rejected the thought repeatedly, but it returned relentlessly - - and he was glad in spite of all his rationalizations against it.

Even on the night when he completed the *sarniall* he was glad that she had promised to bring him a snack. While he reasoned against her companionship, his need for her would not be denied. Now that his mighty weapon was ready, he could afford a moment of rest - - before challenging the dark citadel of death that lay deeper than the grave.

When the knock came at the door, his steps toward it were actually lightened by eager anticipation.

"Lillian, I couldn't have waited another - - "

As the door swung open, his face froze, eyes staring. Reality thundered back upon him with an icy shock. His bright little forbidden awareness of a resurgent taste for personal happiness shattered discordantly like an old piano dropped from a cliff.

"Dalaney!" he shouted.

Dalaney stood there, smiling as sardonically as might be expected, aiming the dark muzzle of a .45 automatic at the central area of his thorax . . .

5: *Catastrophe*

LILLIAN HAMMER quickened her steps at the sound of her own echo in the deserted streets. There was a special element of quietness among the looming shapes of the wharf sheds which seemed to alert her sensitivity to imminent events. Little things - - the wild racing of her heart, a constriction of her throat, the tingling of her nerves - - all these combined to warn her that some tragedy of major proportion was about to occur.

Earthquake victims had often mentioned this strange presentiment prior to catastrophe. But once the presentiment arrived, the event always followed swiftly. And so she hurried, not knowing if away or toward the nameless thing which was poised in another moment of time to strike.

"So *there* you are, baby!"

She had been so intent upon reaching Anthony Meade's hidden laboratory that she had been unaware of the long, blue Chrysler behind her. It drifted alongside the curb and stopped. The driver, a heavy-set man with a crew haircut, grinned triumphantly and opened the door.

She almost dropped her "take out" supper package. "Oh Wade!" she exclaimed. "How did you trail me?"

"Get in, you foolish virgin! This here is Rape Alley - - didn't you know? What the hell's a matter with you doin' a stunt like this? Is *this* the neighborhood your big scoop is in?"

Resignedly but relieved, Lillian got in beside her fellow employee from the Star-Express. "Now don't you spoil this,

Wade Kennedy! There's more than just *story* involved."

Wade Kennedy looked down at her package. "Must be. You're taking his supper to him. Some bum, I'd say."

"He's a brilliant scientist, and he's in hiding. Now please - - "

Wade guided his car slowly down the dimly lighted street. "Where's this heart-throb live, baby? I'd like to meet him," he added with a glint in his eye.

Lillian tightened her lips. "Wade - - so help me! I'll not go there at all if you're going to - - "

He patted her knee. "Lil, honey, you're talkin' to your old buddy. Remember?"

She brushed his hand away, though she knew he was more like a brother to her than anything else. Big Wade Kennedy, ex-marine sergeant, former heavyweight boxer, distribution foreman for the Star-Express, he had been her devoted slave for three eventful years.

"But this is too important to spoil now, Wade," she pleaded. "It's - - it's too delicate and highly charged with potentials. If you come with me, he might close up - - "

"Aw, now Lil. I just was worried about you - - "

"Wait, Wade. There's the place. Slow down!"

"*That* big, black shed? In *there?* Damn place looks like a prop for one a them TV foreign spy operas." He stopped the car, wonderingly, and automatically pulled out a package of cigarettes.

She placed her hand on his. "Don't take time for that," she pleaded. "I want to go in."

Wade took hold of her hand. It was cold - - and it trembled. "Say! What the - - !"

Lillian leaned her head abruptly against his shoulder, but quickly recovered. "I'm scared, Wade. Something's going to happen. Something tells me to hurry in there to him - - yet to stay away. Oh I'm *glad* you're here!"

Wade hunched his powerful frame together, looking at the dark warehouse, then back at her. "Say now - - maybe this is gonna get real interesting!" he remarked, brightening up at the prospect of action. "Now don't you fret, honey! Your old buddy - - "

She shook her head. "You don't understand. He's in immediate danger - - *now!* I don't know why, but it's of terrible significance - - I'm sure of it!"

"Well, let's go in and bring him out! Let's get him some police protection, if that's what you think."

"Oh yes, Wade! Help me convince him to come with us! I feel so *sorry* for him - - struggling in secret desperation against dangers he can't mention - - and so alone! He needs help, Wade, and I know he needs it *now*! - - tonight!"

"Okay! Okay! So let's go in and get him!"

* * * * * *

"Well, Shahn," said Dalaney, coldly, "you've played your hand - - and here's where we *all* show our cards, eh? We've missed you, the *Doctor* and I." As he spoke, he moved slowly into the room while Shahn backed away.

Shahn's eyes narrowed in hate and his nostrils flared angrily. "Menlor, I am *Khal.* Put that gun away or prepare for the consequences. I've known all along you're a collaborator, and now I know Lanis is a Metamorph. I'm going to destroy him *and* his incubation center."

Dalaney raised his brows in mock surprise. "Really now!" Suddenly, his lips thinned out and his eyes glared at Shahn. "Is this what you wrung out of Pearl Gordon before you eliminated her?"

"I did not - - "

"Shut up!" He waved the gun, motioning Shahn to get away from the lab bench. Then he moved toward it and lifted the gleaming *sarniall,* tucking it under his arm. "Your life may still be of use to us, but not nearly as much as before you completed *this.* I am prepared to shoot you down if you resist.

You will obey me or die quickly."

Shahn's dark eyes glowered. "Menlor - - "

"My name is Charles Dalaney."

"*Menlor* - - there are major stress points in time and history, like mighty hinges upon which swing the gates of destiny for the human race. This moment is one of them. Do you think I would actually allow you to leave here with the *sarniall?*" His whole face darkened with a menacing wrath. "*Put it down!*"

Dalaney studied the other without expression. His knuckles whitened as his grip tightened on the automatic.

It was then that Shahn saw a large, powerfully built man with a crew haircut enter the room silently behind Dalaney. The man grinned confidently and winked at Shahn. The latter had no time to warn the unknown Terrestrial what he was up against.

As Wade Kennedy aimed a rabbit punch at Dalaney's neck that might have stopped a Model T, Dalaney moved with invisible swiftness, before the full force of the blow could take effect. As he turned in a blur of movement, Shahn moved also, letting go of his time sense so that his perspective was now purely Nrlanian and all things Earthly were painfully slow by comparison.

Wade Kennedy was an Earthly ox. He hardly moved at all before Dalaney had lifted him and flung him at the lab bench, where he slumped into unconsciousness. Too slowly for Shahn's quickened eye to follow, a hot soldering iron fell among newspapers along with an open can of acetate dope. The papers smouldered, flames puffed into hungry life - - but by that time much had already happened elsewhere.

Shahn tackled Dalaney head-on, knocking the automatic out of his hand. In the struggle, Dalaney dropped the *sarniall* on the floor. Though twice as strong and fast as any Terrestrial, he was no match for Shahn, who seemed hent on destroying him with his bare hands.

As Dalaney went down under Shahn's attack, already feeling the steely band of his grip against his throat, he caught sight of the flames rising up under the lab bench.

"Fire!" he gurgled.

One distraction was enough, but when Shahn caught sight of Lillian Hammer entering the room and running for the gun on the floor, her beautiful face twisted in fright and alarm, his grip loosened just enough for Dalaney to break free. Shahn lunged for him, only to be met by a kick in the face.

He blacked out momentarily, while pain shot silvery spangles through the dark immensities that had engulfed him. When he regained consciousness, he heard shots. Lillian Hammer stood there near the doorway, firing the automatic point blank at Dalaney. Smoke was rising fast in the room. Lights and shadows danced weirdly in the presence of the growing flames, but in the midst of it all Shahn saw something that made him cry out in mortal anguish.

"*No!*"

Too late did he stagger to his feet to grapple with the bullet-torn man who held in his dying hands the glowing *sarniall,* its terrible forces concentrated upon the girl. Darkness, like a negative living entity, swirled about Lillian Hammer, and she paled, almost dropping the gun. She staggered toward the dark doorway as Shahn picked up Dalaney and literally smashed him against the wall.

As he turned toward the girl, she faced him unseeingly and fired the gun once more, spasmodically. Shahn grimaced, clutching his middle, and fell across Wade Kennedy's prostrate form where it lay perilously close to the now billowing flames.

As he lost consciousness, he saw Lillian, her face drained of the color of life, staggering into the darkness beyond the door . . .

* * * * * *

The young nurse opened the door of

the hospital room, surveying the patient with a mixture of wonderment and suspicion. Men crowded behind her in the corridor, but only one was admitted.

"That's all, gentlemen," she warned them.

"But that's not fair, Miss!" protested one reporter. "Who's *this* guy, anyway?"

The man who had been admitted turned to the nurse, warning her with a look. As she resolutely went out, closing the door, she was heard to say, "He's a specialist . . "

Shahn, lying propped up on the bed, surveyed his visitor through listless eyes. A despair deep as damnation had assailed him. The *sarniall* had been designed to attack the negative life forces of Metamorphs - - *not* Lillian Hammer!

The stranger bothered him because he said nothing. He only sat down in a chair beside the bed and looked at him. He was a large man who had suffered a disfiguring accident - - probably was a war veteran. His face looked as though it had been burned at one time. Very red and vaguely discolored by faint patches of scar tissue. The eyebrows were gone, and the red toupee was obvious. His eyes were penetrating, his jaw powerful, determined.

When Shahn finally concentrated his attention on him, he pulled out a long red wallet from his coat pocket, opened it, and flashed an impressive I.D.

"Sam Hubert," he said, succinctly and almost tonelessly. "Special deputy, Military Intelligence." He smiled faintly. "I'm not an officer. The nurse is right. I'm a specialist."

Shahn's eyes narrowed slightly. "A specialist in *what?*"

"Well, for one thing - - in keeping your true identity from the Press. That's Government orders."

"What do you mean - - my *true* identity?"

"Relax. My specialty is flying saucers. I've followed them from the day they began arriving - - radar statistics, actual photographs, even chased them."

Shahn tensed but controlled himself. He forced a derisive smile. "I thought this was a reputable hospital. How did they let *you* in?"

Unpurturbed, the special deputy began to summarize. "You were shot - - apparently through the liver - - but I've seen X-rays showing your heart in the center of your thorax. You were lucky, incidentally. The bullet missed the heart. Also, the doctors know about your extra eyelids and your unusual endocrine system, and that your navel is artificial. You're extra-terrestrial." He smiled again, with his mouth but not with his eyes. "That's why I'm here. I'm a sort of one man secret department - - the only one allowed to really specialize in the subject. In case I'm wrong. the Airforce disowns me. If I'm right, then they take over. Until I prove my contentions, I'm sort of expendable, you might say."

Shahn's face hardened. "I will not be interfered with," he said, peremptorily. "The Airforce could do nothing. I - - "

The visitor held up his hand. "I haven't finished," he said. "The newspapers are after this story and they want some explanations as to what could account for your strange behavior at the fire."

"Fire? I - - hardly remember - - except the girl - - Lillian Hammer."

"That's just it. Only you knew she was still in the warehouse. Mr. Kennedy - the man who tried to help you - - regained consciousness in time to carry you out of the burning building about the time the police arrived, followed by ambulances and the fire department. Don't you remember what happened then?"

"I - - I went in and got Lillian out of there."

"That's right - - and that's what the papers are so excited about. Strong men tried to stop you, because no man could live in that searing heat. But - - gravely wounded as you were - - you moved

like a bullet - - you fought and threw police and firemen about as though they were children. You dashed into that inferno and came out alive - - carrying the girl. Then you really passed out. The doctors point to an extra gland you possess as the possible explanation - - "

Shahn's eyes widened. "The girl - - Lillian! Is she - - "

The agent leaned forward intently. "That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question, Mr. Meade. Very carefully, I want you to answer me: What do *you* think should be Miss Hammer's status now? - - living, dead - - or *what?*"

Shahn rose up, then winced, clutching his middle. The other was beside him instantly, pressing him gently back.

"Take it easy!"

Shahn strained to rise, then relaxed - - except for his thoughts. "I take it - - she's not dead."

"No."

Shahn closed his eyes, unconsciously biting his lower lip. If he dared believe what he *thought* the *sarniall* had wrought in her, he knew she would prefer to be dead.

"Mr. Kennedy said something about a strange weapon. We found the charred remains of an odd assembly after the fire. Did somebody use it on her?"

"Yes! Dalaney - - the only weapon of its kind in the universe - - and only fired once - - at a wonderful Earth girl like - - "

"Dalaney, eh? You knew your assailant, then? Was he also - - "

"Yes, he was also an extra-terrestrial! Leave me alone! I'm going to Lillian!" Shahn started to get out of bed in spite of his pain.

"Stay where you are!" commanded the agent, sternly. "Now you listen to me! You'll get to see the girl. She is alive and conscious - - right here in this hospital. But that's a personal equation. My official duties involve you and your kind. But don't get me wrong. I'm here to help you. I want to know your problem, and you'd better tell me about it."

Shahn felt weak. He subsided again, thinking: She's alive and conscious. That, at least, was something!

"I must see her as soon as possible," he said.

"I'll tell her that - - tonight, before I leave. You can see her tomorrow, but I want to be there when you do. Just now, you'd better cooperate with me if you want some friendly assistance."

Shahn studied the other carefully. "What do *you* know about flying saucers?" he asked.

A grim smile answered him. "I was inside one of them when - - I think it was a force of your enemies surprised me."

Shahn's brows arched. "You *what?*"

"It had cracked up. I was just coming out of it when I walked into some kind of heat ray." He pointed at his scarred face. "They left me for dead. I never did see them. They burned the ship to ashes."

Suddenly, Shahn was considering new possibilities. "All right, Sam Hubert. Maybe I *could* use a friend on the terrestrial side - - a secret worker like yourself. If you're going to help, you'll have to know what you're up against. Sooner or later the world will know it is being invaded by forces which both your kind and my kind must destroy . . . I'll tell you who I really am . . "

* * * * * *

It was a sober faced Sam Hubert who went to see Lillian Hammer, but before he reached her room he was joined by big Wade Kennedy of the Star-Express.

"I was hoping to see her again," Wade told him. "And yet I'm scared stiff. Have you seen that *look* in her eyes?"

They found her bed empty. And they followed her trail, through an open window on the ground floor.

But how were they to know she had gone to church at such a time of night?

Lillian Hammer looked up at the altar and crossed herself again. In her eyes

was a vague emptiness, yet her mind was keenly alert - - in a cold and lonely sort of way.

She had a memory of former grace - - the mystical passion of humility, the awareness of subconscious fulfillment before the face of God.

But now - - *emptiness!*

She screamed at the altar, then buried her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. The young priest on duty hurried to her side. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right," he told her, peacefully. "Whatever misfortune - - none is so great that it may not be healed - - in this House."

Lillian looked up at him, horrified, her face streaked by tears. "No!" she cried, getting up. *"No!"*

And she fled incontinently from the one real sanctuary of her kind - - because she was beyond its reach. And only one man on Earth could know the answer.

She had to find him, so she retraced her steps once more to the hospital. If *he* could not heal her more than mortal wound, then nothing mattered - - neither life nor death. For even suicide would be futile . . .

The little cherubic faced man with the merry blue eyes presented his credentials at the night desk of the hospital. "Doctor Lanis," he said. "You have one of my patients here - - Anthony Meade."

The nurse looked up, startled. "One of *your* patients?"

"Yes." Lanis smiled disarmingly, tapping his head. "Mental case," he explained. "He escaped my sanitarium in Los Angeles, and I'm afraid he can be quite violent. However, I am prepared to take him back with me."

"I'm afraid - - he can't be released without proper authorization."

"Oh I think. he can."

And Lanis was right, because his kind had a way with people - - like possessing one's mind and will and making a person think everything was quite as it should be.

* * * * * *

Shahn was heard to cry out in terrible alarm when Lanis was admitted to his room - - but then such "mental cases" always did resist recapture. Did not the kind little doctor say his patient could be violent?

A smiling, glazy-eyed hospital staff even helped Lanis get Shahn's straight-jacketed body into the black sedan that was waiting to take him away.

While Sam Hubert and Wade Kennedy searched the night for Lillian Hammer.

And while Lillian walked alone in the streets toward the hospital - - bent on finding Shahn . . . .

6: *Revelation*

THE WINDOW of the hospital room was locked. She moved along the dark wall of the building, behind the shrubbery, searching for other windows. All were locked against her, as though now she were no longer a part of the world she had known. In the dim illumination of the distant parking lot, the upper story windows were like the eyes of an alien jury, looking sternly down.

Animal! A humanoid freak, devoid of the eternal *essence* - - a mere organism of flesh and blood and nerve ganglia - - barred forever from the promise of extension beyond the grave!

She bit at her knuckles, heedless of the pain. Anthony Meade bad built the instrument whicb had given her this negative existence. Only he would know the answer to her plight, if any answer were available in Heaven, Earth or Hell. Well - - why not go in the front entrance? She was not a prisoner. She would demand to see Anthony Meade - - tonight, *now.*

She hesitated at the driveway. Before the entrance was a long, black sedan. Several attendants in white coats were struggling with a squirming figure in a straight-jacket, under the supervision of a small, professional looking man with a

black goatee.

Suddenly, her heart seemed to pause when the man in the straight-jacket cried out and she recognized his voice.

"You can hypnotize *them,* Lanis, but not the Khal! You'd better kill me now! If I get loose you won't have another chance - - "

The little man interrupted sharply with a word in a foreign tongue. He signalled to his chauffeur, who opened the rear door of the sedan and helped the attendants to deposit the victim's body on the back seat.

Lillian clenched her small fists, her thoughts racing wildly. Another enemy had struck at Anthony Meade - - a more bizarre enemy than her wildest imaginings had included. A master hypnotist!

And they were taking him away somewhere. If she let him get out of her sight - - if they harmed him - - she might never have a chance, herself. If any antidote existed, only he would know.

Without allowing the hovering phantom of fear to deter her in her wild purpose, she darted unseen to the opposite rear door of the sedan. The chauffeur and the weird man with the goatee were momentarily engaged in herding the hospital staff back inside the building.

"Lillian!" hissed Shahn, as he saw her crawl in on the floor of the car and quietly close the door behind her. "In the name of Eternity, save yourself! Get out!"

"In the name of Eternity," she whispered back, "I am here. Be still!"

* * * * * *

Sam Hubert's scar-lined face was grimly set under the burden of premonition when be entered the hospital lobby followed by a bewildered and worried Wade Kennedy.

"What's going on in here?" he demanded to know, as he addressed the night receptionist.

"Oh Mr. Hubert - - we've called the police!" exclaimed the nurse. "But you're *just* the man we're looking for!"

Swiftly and with admirable coherence in spite of her fright, the woman related what had happened, aided meanwhile by all the other nurses and interns who had been victimized by Lanis.

"It wasn't exactly hypnotism," explained one student doctor. "It was rather - - a direct dominance of the will. We knew we were being coerced but we couldn't do a thing about it."

"Yeah," put in another. "It was like in a dream - - a nightmare! That guy's too weird to be running around loose!"

"Well, he's captured an *extremely* important man," Hubert told them. "Did you get the stranger's name?"

"Oh yes!" cried the nurse at the desk. "Doctor Lanis! That was it!"

"Hm-m. Lanis and Dalaney. Dalaney got killed trying to capture Meade. Now Lanis takes him. Which way did he go?"

"He said something about a sanitarium in Los Angeles."

"Sanitarium, eh? *That* may be a gross understatement."

There was more. Before the police arrived, one intern hurried downstairs from one of the patient's rooms. Someone had seen the figure of a woman enter the sedan from the shrubbery.

"Hey!" Wade exclaimed. "That must've been Lillian!"

"Probably," commented Hubert, somberly. He paused, listening. In the distance he could hear police sirens approaching. He started out the front door, with Wade at his heels.

He ran like a man with an artificial leg, but he ran swiftly, and Wade had all he could do to keep up with him in spite of years of roadwork as a fighter. It was only when they had reached Hubert's custom made sports car in the parking lot that the latter realized Wade was behind him.

"Sorry," he said, getting inside quickly. "This is a solo flight."

Wade got in and slammed the door. "That's what you think, buddy. Lillian Hammer is a particular friend of mine. Get going!"

Hubert glared at him peremptorily, then relaxed slightly. "Wade, I'm even ducking the police because they'd only be in the way. I'm the only man in Military Intelligence knows enough about this thing to even guess what to do. I've run into this thing before. Look at my face. My leg is artificial, too. That was from a light skirmish with them the last time. This time I *think* I'm prepared. You, most certainly, are not - - and never will be. Your chances of living through it are about one in a thousand."

Wade glared back. "You're wasting time. How about trying highway 101 and keeping our eyes peeled for a long, black sedan?"

"That's what I had in mind. But get this. So much is involved here that if you deter my efforts you will have to become expendable. I like you, so I should kick you out."

"Are you gonna drive this heap - - or am I?"

Hubert gave Wade one more peremptory glare, but there was a grim light of appreciation in his narrowed eyes as he started the car and roared abruptly out of the hospital grounds. He drove unhesitatingly through a red signal, swerving screeching around a hay truck with effortless ease. In a matter of seconds, the speedometer soared to seventy, then to eighty. Wade resisted the impulse to put his feet through the floorboards. He gritted his teeth.

"I've been waiting a long time for Meade's enemies to show their hand," Hubert said, evenly. "This is it."

"I sure wished to hell I knew what this is all about," grumbled Wade. "Especially what's wrong with Lillian. Back in that warehouse fire I didn't see everything that went on - - but *you* found out. What happened to her?"

"She may not know - - *yet*. But I have an idea that's why she went with Meade in that car. She doesn't dare let him out of her sight. She thinks he's the only living being with an answer to her predicament."

"Do you think she's right?"

Sam Hubert maneuvered the car with masterful skill between two lanes of opposed traffic. Headlights glared, horns wailed mournfully, tires screeched - - but on he went, never diminishing his speed, watching the road ahead for the long, black sedan.

"There is only one who might help her now," he said, finally. "And it isn't Anthony Meade. . "

* * * * * *

The long, black sedan purred smoothly and swiftly along the highway. From her position on the floor of the car, Lillian could not see the doctor and his chauffeur in the front seat. All she was aware of was Shahn and the fastenings of his straight-jacket which she struggled to untie.

He lay there silently watching her, or at times his dark eyes would look up at the driver. Finally, when she had actually unfastened the jacket and he was free to move, he pulled her face next to his and whispered. They were passing a heavy line of trucks and it was unlikely he could have been heard in the front seat.

"Now get down and hang on," he told her.

Their faces had never been this close before. Their eyes, wide with their mutual anxiety, intimate in the proximity of the unknown, were only inches apart.

"Are you all right?" he added.

"You're wounded," she whispered back, as she saw him wince. Her hand touched his in the dark.

"Watch it!" he warned her, looking up ahead.

As she turned involuntarily to look at the front seat, she gasped, then covered her mouth. They had started out with two men in the front, but now there was only *one*. The chauffeur was still at the wheel, but the strange little man with the goatee had disappeared.

"Down!" hissed Shahn.

As Lillian ducked down, trembling in nameless fear, Shahn spoke to the driver in a strange tongue that she could not associate with any language she had ever heard before.

"The language of the Khals is dead," answered the chauffeur, in English, without looking back. "And so is the race. Resign yourself, Shahn. We belong to the mutation. It is inevitable."

Gaping in wonderment, Lillian searched the tense face of her companion. Once again she saw there that strange kingly expression of wrath as he stared back at the chauffeur.

"There is yet time," he insisted. "Your strength is in me - - if you will serve me - - all of you!"

"Silence - - or *he* will return!" warned the driver.

"Pah! It is a great effort for *them* to extend themselves to so far from their chrysalides."

"You do not know their great power. Now be still!"

Shahn concentrated every faculty of his mind on the other man. He placed in his mind a vision - - of a tree falling suddenly across the road.

The car swerved, skidded, jumped the shoulder and crashed through a fence, turning over just as Lillian screamed. The chauffeur struck his head against the windshield and went limp over the wheel.

Lillian did not see the next thing happen, but in another instant she was outside the car, rolling over the ground in Anthony Meade's arms. Then they were crawling under bushes, and finally he bade her lie still, while he looked back.

The sedan lay on its side in a gulley ten feet below the higbway. Up above, cars were skidding to a halt. There was a sound of people shouting.

"Come on!" he exclaimed, pulling her to her feet. "Run!"

Strangely, he was leading her away from the highway into a clump of trees.

"Why this way?" she gasped. "The people are stopping. We can get help."

"No! They'll attract attention to us. Do as I say! If *he* comes back, they can't help."

"But - - where did he go? - - the *little* man. . "

"Never mind. Just hurry!"

After half an hour of wandering through back woods and meadows, they found a combination tool shed and pump house near an irrigation canal. Inside the crude wooden building was a single bunk and several old blankets. Shahn took her to the bunk and they both sat down, breathing hard from their exertions. He held his abdomen, trying tc still the pain that was there.

"Lie down here," she told him, and he did.

"I feel weak," he said, looking up at her, "but I'm all right. It's just the pain - - no bleeding."

They were both silent a while, looking at each other. Suddenly, however, she burst into tears. "Tell me what this is all about!" she cried out. "Who *are* you? What is it your enemies want? And what has *happened* to me! I feel that my soul is dead!"

She sobbed bitterly as he reached out to her, and then she was lying beside him, her body shaking momentarily in her grief and nameless fear.

"Such a curse as this is beyond the curse of Hell!" she almost screamed. "You have to help me or I'll go mad! I can't stand it! I'm dead, but I'm alive - - for what! Oh Anthony! - - Anthony! *Please* - - for the love of God help me!"

His heart went out to her there in the dark that was laden with dread beyond her own imaginings, for they were not yet safe. He knew, even as he listened with the unearthly auditory senses of his kind - - to the night - - and the brooding sky.

Suddenly he held her to him, pressing her face tightly against his, holding her head and her body still. "Life is not ended," he told her. "Get hold of yourself, Lillian!"

"Myself is gone!" she wailed. "I am

nothing but an empty shell of flesh!"

"And so am I - - and all of my kind."

Then Lillian was still. Her quivering ceased. She lay there close pressed against him, absorbing the implication of his words. Finally, she pulled slowly away and sat up, looking at him without expression, her face stained with tears.

"What did you say?"

He tried to smile but couldn't. "Your kind has been raised in the concept of duality," he told her "It is hard for you to conceive of a people without souls, as you call them. Perhaps, long ago in our past - - "

Her eyes widened. "Anthony! Are you insane?"

"No, but I am not of your world. And my name is not Anthony. It is Shahn. I was born on another planet, Lillian. I am extra-terrestrial. That should explain a lot of things to you - - my strange seclusion, the high-voltage battery, the language you heard me speak, the strange weapon in the warehouse - - the mystery of Doctor Lanis - - and that night in the church . . "

Lillian did not get up. She sat rigidly on the edge of the bunk, suddenly separated from him as though by an invisible gulf that was as measureless as time and space. Her first reaction had been one of utter disbelief. But then she remembered the church. Not even an atheist would have acted so strangely. Once she allowed the seed of credulity to be planted, it grew in fertile ground.

"It - - it's difficult - - to grasp," she said, tonelessly.

"Of course." He groped for her hand and held it gently but firmly. "Fiction is flirtation. The unknown revealed is like sin, because it assails the citadels of thought, knowledge and tradition. As to the virgin the awesome experience of reality engenders the instinct of preservation, so the cloistered egotism of a world-biased mentality must quail before the baleful eye of cosmic revelation. Here am I - - a human being from realms beyond the sky. But - - granted this, you had not imagined I could exist without a soul. Just as it is shocking and strange to you, so was it a mind-staggering concept to me that such a thing as duality could be. It is marvelous, and it begins to explain many things - - many things . . . "

Lillian remained speechless, feeling alone, lost, chilled by the etheric winds of void without end - - herself a microbe of life, the world a grain of sand - - the stars more remote than the dawn of light. Her mind reeled in vertigo.

The man beside her began to talk. He knew that when the foundations of reason are shaken a new foundation must be filled in quickly. He told her of Nrlan, his own beloved world - - now long dead and shattered. He told her of the Metamorphs, and of Vrulnus - - and Rospor - - of the black chrysalides that lay in the contaminated soil of Earth, from which the evil extensions of the Metamorphs emanated, assuming human form or any other form they chose - - of how they already dominated the world, its governments, posing as well known chosen leaders in every important position of authority.

He described the plight of the Nrlani and how they were scattered over the Earth, ekeing out their temporary existence against the time of mandatory suicide, to avoid the mutation, and of how the Metamorphs sought them out for the purpose of perpetuating their own kind.

He told her of his own purpose and his desperate hope - - and of their danger, even now.

"If I built one *sarniall*, I can build another, and they know it. If I were to give my own kind even a single sign of hope, I would be hailed as the Khal, and my strength would grow. They can't afford to let me get out of their hands. I tried to warn you, Lillian, but I was weak. I should have turned you away the first day you saw me, but I couldn't."

She looked down at him, while she pushed away her tears with the heel of

her hand. "Why not?"

Again, he tried a smile that failed. "Why burden you now?"

But she guessed the reason. "I was strangely attracted to you, too, Shahn," she said. "I am as much to blame."

He emitted a dry, bitter laugh. "Two people who are perfectly matched often never meet, but we who are twice separated from one another by insurmountable barriers - - " He waved his hand, unable to go on.

"There is much we have in common now," she answered. "We are thrown together in our mutual misfortune. Where else can I go but with you? If you die, I am without reprieve. If you live, you may still find a solution - - or this great man, Vrulnus. You or he must solve it. Without that single shred of hope, even my mind will die!"

"Then - - the very magnitude of the barrier between us is the bond that holds us together. Lillian, as I owe my people the chance to live again - - I also owe it to you."

Their mutual situation engendered a poignant loneliness that must be shared as the only defense against itself. Together, they were a finite island suspended above the reasonless abyss. Apart - - mere atoms in chaos.

They clung to each other suddenly like children on a raft in a flood. Rationalizations were beyond the sphere of their emotions. At length, they slept lightly, and the night deepened in its silence and its intimate darkness . . .

7: *The Debut of Arms*

"THERE!" shouted Wade, pointing ahead at the traffic jam. "I see a sedan in the ditch!"

"Looks like it," said Hubert, slamming on the brakes to avoid a Highway Patrol car as it made a U-turn with red lights ablaze.

When the sports car had skidded around twice and come in on the shoulder backwards, Sam Hubert jerked on the emergency, and both of them were out, running toward the wreck.

"Who the hell are *you*!" shouted the Highway Patrol officer, angrily, already waiting for them on the bank.

Sam flashed his credentials. "This is a G-2 item," he said swiftly, climbing down toward the car. Stand by. I'll want your radio."

Grimly obedient, the officer followed, and the three of them inspected the sedan. Even the chauffeur had disappeared.

"There's an APB out," said the officer. "Look for a black sedan and a Doctor Lanis - - captured a man wanted by G-2. They're gone, so what's next?"

Hubert straightened up from the wreck and looked off into the wilderness. "You'll need a posse to search that area," he answered.

"You think Doctor Lanis is out there?"

"No - - but perhaps his chauffeur - - and Anthony Meade."

"And Lillian Hammer," put in Wade.

"Lillian Hammer - - who's she?"

Hubert looked up at the sky. "I'd better use your radio," he said, irrelevantly. "Where's your car, officer?"

As they reached the shoulder, curious bystanders crowded in.

"Anybody hurt, officer?"

"Betcha they were drunk, eh?"

The officer waved them off. "You people move on," he told them. "You're blocking the highway."

Wade Kennedy looked wistfully off into the wilderness, wondering about Lillian. He heard Hubert at the radio in the patrol car, asking to be connected through a police phone-patch with somebody in S.A.C. Suddenly, Hubert was raising his voice.

"I don't give a damn *what* your regulations are!" he shouted. "I want General Morrison!"

Wade and the officer exchanged glances, wryly. When the general was finally connected, Sam Hubert said something in a low tone that was unintelligible to both men, prefacing his remarks with a code reference. Then - -

abruptly he signed off and got out of the car.

"You can call your posse now," he said to the officer. "We'll wait in my car."

"Whaddayou mean *wait*?" argued Wade. "Aren't we gonna look for Lillian?"

Hubert motioned him along as he hurried back to the sports car. "Somebody else may be looking for her and Meade," he said. "That's what we have to watch for. Come on!"

When they got in the car, Hubert started up the engine. "Look for a road or a cowpath. We'll drive into the area."

"I like action," said Wade, "but I sure hate mysteries."

"You invited yourself into this one. Now shut up and watch the sky."

"What for?"

"Flying saucers."

"*What!*"

"That's what I was talking to General Morrison about. I asked him for a fighter plane cover - - because if they ever show up they'll show up now. They can't afford to let Meade escape - - and that isn't his real name anyway." He found a narrow dirt road and jerked the car into it, traveling rapidly.

"Say, what the hell *is* this? I think you're going nuts!"

"I told you you weren't equipped for what's involved," snapped Hubert. "Just don't make yourself a nuisance."

"But - - flying saucers! For Christ's sake - - all I want is Lillian!"

"Won't do you any good if *they* show up. I'm trying to ward them off from here."

Hubert found a small hillock under a tree and scared off a lowing herd of cattle. He parked the car.

"This is a good spot," he said. "Keep your eyes open."

Wade swore. He started to get out. Hubert took hold of him.

"Stay here," he said.

Wade swung his hand, knocking the other's arm away. "You like your health, you leave me alone, sonny! I'm gonna look - - "

It was all he had a chance to say. Hubert was out of the car after him like a cat. Wade swung at him swiftly, but he hardly knew what happened after that. He woke up a moment later, back in the car, with Sam Hubert glaring at him, a steel-like grip holding him down.

"So you're going to be a hero," Sam snarled through his teeth, "and run into the danger zone after your girl friend - - holding her in one arm while you fight off the weapons of another world with your free hand! Look at my face! Do you want Lillian Hammer to get what I got? Now shut up and do as I say or I'll throttle you - - right here and now!"

Wade studied his captor for half a minute without expression. Then he grinned. "You have a way with you, chum. But I read you good - - even if it's still crazy."

Hubert let him sit up. "We'll just wait," he said.

Wade straightened his tie, brushed back his hair, and ruefully rubbed a bruised chin. "Be kinda tough on that posse you're sending in here," he commented. "You didn't warn *them* about flying saucers."

"That officer would have become a bottle-neck like you if I'd told him the truth, but his men may arrive in time to be witnesses to what I suspect. That's all I want - - witnesses . . "

"To what - - flying saucers?"

"Yes."

"Well, even if I could swallow this baloney about flying saucers - - it still wouldn't make sense. How are mere jet fighters gonna take on *those* things? Why not use Nikes?"

"These are not jets. You may see a new kind of plane in action. Do you know anything about science?"

"Highschool physics is all - - plus what I read in the comics."

"Ever heard about why certain gases like nitrogen are inert?"

"I flunked out on that part but had to make it up to play football, so it's one thing I still remember. Something about their atomic structure, I guess. The outer electron shell - - "

"Exactly. Now suppose a certain type of intense radiation could change the outer shell of the nitrogen atom."

"It might have a valence - - maybe combine - - Hey!"

"That's it. Combine with oxygen. Combustion of the air, itself. These new fighters have radiation engines. They run on air. In upper altitudes their velocity is practically unlimited."

"Yeow! Who invented that!"

"It's a little item I gave the Airforce, myself."

"*You!*"

"Don't get excited. I didn't invent it. It was a little piece of science I borrowed before I got burned for my efforts."

"You mean - - that's how flying saucers operate?"

"Not entirely, but it's a principle they sometimes use in the atmosphere when magnetic disturbances are too great."

"How did you find out all this?"

"We've talked enough. Let's watch."

Wade had no recourse but to sit there with Sam Hubert and watch the dark, silent sky. He fumed, unbelieving - - helpless, yet not without hope. .

* * * * * *

Shahn opened his eyes to find his lips brushing Lillian's soft cheek. She was asleep in his arms. His heart ached for her, but she was not the cause of his sudden alertness.

A sound which would have been inaudible to terrestrial ears stirred his instincts alive. Far away and faint, yet insistently close as the air he breathed - - like a static condition. In fact, it *was* a static condition. As his lips brushed Lillian's dark hair, a slight spark jumped at him.

He sat up, and she opened her eyes.

"Shahn, what is it?"

For answer, he pulled her to him, holding her close. "Just sit tight, love. We have no other choice."

"Shahn! You trembled! You know what it is! Something's coming after us!"

"Yes, but if we just stay where we are - - "

"But what *is* it, Shahn?"

"You might as well know. I told you I was important to them. They're searching for me up there right now."

"You mean - - airoraft?"

"In a flying saucer - - as you call them. They're really interstellar space ships."

She held herself tightly to him. "Oh Shahn - - I can't grasp it all! Are you sure? I can't hear a thing."

"What do you feel?"

"You."

"Brush your hand through my hair."

She did so and it crackled like cat's fur.

"Magnetics," he said. "It charges the air when they're close." He felt her tremble and he held her to him. "If they find us - - stay close. Maybe I can buy my way out of it - - and you in the bargain."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Nothing - - not now. They can detect our infra-red. You know your science."

The sound deepened until it became audible in Lillian's ears. It throbbed in the air around them. Suddenly, a bluish light flooded the landscape outside, and Lillian screamed.

In the same instant, the figure of a man appeared in the doorway of the shack, limned weirdly in the bluish light.

"Come out, Shahn," the man said. "They are here." It was Lanis' chauffeur.

Shahn sprang from the bunk and was at the man's throat before Lillian realized they were not alone. But he forgot that he was weak and wounded. The other was stronger and quicker than he was now.

Lillian saw the stranger trip Shahn, saw the two fall on the ground together.

The air throbbed with a crescendoing warning of doom as she searched frantically for something to use as a weapon. Her hand suddenly closed on the handle of a steel pick.

In that moment, two more men appeared at the door. One of them moved almost as swiftly as Shahn, throwing himself into the fight. The other lunged toward her. She raised the pick instinctively, ready to kill.

"Lillian!"

The swirling blue light suddenly illumined the homely, square-jawed face of Wade Kennedy. One big fist caught the descending pick. Behind him, Lillian saw the chauffeur break loose from his new opponent. He was blinded, his eyes gouged, but a pistol glinted in his hand as Sam Hubert froze, facing him.

"Wade!" Lillian screamed, pointing.

Wade turned, saw and struck with a long-armed, professional lunge, and the steel pick buried itself in the center of the chauffeur's startled, frozen face.

Nausea welled up within her, but she fought it. She kneeled beside Shahn, who was on his hands and knees shaking his head.

"Listen to me!" exclaimed Sam Hubert. "We can't run for it. It's too late. We'll be captured - - all of us. But don't show resistance. Play for time - - get it? You must play for time!"

Shahn staggered to his feet. "What do you know about it, Hubert?" he asked bitterly. "I'll give the instructions here. You stay out of this. It's me they want - - and I know what to bargain with."

"But you don't represent the Government of the United States. I do. Just do as I say and no heroics!"

"I won't argue the point. It's *my* kind we're dealing with - - and I am Khal."

"You are if Vrulnus is dead."

"I told you he was."

"Well - - chins up, everybody. Here they come."

Shahn looked curiously at Wade Kennedy, who had his arm around Lillian. *Everybody* seemed to want to take over around here. The old wrath of the Khals rose within him. He stepped proudly to the doorway then and faced his captors, eyes blazing, his nostrils distended, lips tight-pressed together.

The flat space ship lay in the meadow before them, its observation dome ports aglow. Half a hundred Nrlanians stood outside the shack waiting for him. In their hands were sonic heaters.

"Holy tomcats!" muttered Wade. "I'd feel saner if I was dreaming!"

"Put your weapons away," Shahn commanded, addressing the Nrlanians in their own tongue. "You would not use them because you still need a Khal. If Vrulnus is gone, then I am your only hope. Be with me and you can fight to victory - - or die without shame. Serve the Metamorphs and you deny yourselves the last reality of honor as men!"

The fifty Nrlanians observed him in apathetic silence, but Wade stared at him in stunned amazement.

"Serve yourselves and call me Khal - - or I will show you how to die!" he shouted.

"Ye gods!" ejaculated Wade, hoarsely. "Meade is one of *them!*"

"Be quiet!" whispered Lillian. "Control yourself, Wade, please!"

"But it ain't easy! Whaddayou expect? This isn't Market Street at high noon, baby. This is the D.T.'s at midnight! Brother! You were *really* working on a scoop, honey!"

Sam Hubert placed a restraining hand on Shahn's arm. "Remember," he said, "the girl. If you resist now - - we all die. I told you to play for time. I have a reason, Shahn."

"Hey!" exclaimed Wade, insuppressibly. "What about those planes? The General musta stood you up, Hubert!"

Shahn turned upon Hubert, his teeth flashing in anger. "Don't give *me* your airforces and terrestrial defenses - - they're a waste of time here! I alone can evaluate - - "

Sam Hubert produced a small auto-

matic. "I'll give you this!" he whispered tensely. "You don't know as much as you think you do. These are not ordinary Nrlanians - - they are a new breed created by the Metamorphs and your words could not have the slightest effect on them. You must surrender to them - - now!"

Wade and Lillian opened their eyes wide, looking from Sam Hubert to Shahn and back again.

"You!" exclaimed Shahn. "You're - - Nrlanian - - a collaborator!"

"Why the dirty - - " Wade started to exclaim.

Sam Hubert stepped out of range of both men's fists. Though with a slight limp, he moved swiftly, backing toward the Nrlanian force from the ship, his automatic trained on Shahn.

"Surrender to them, Shahn, or die futilely - - and your friends with you."

Shahn turned to his two terrestrial companions, but principally to Lillian. "All right," he muttered in a low tone. "He *said* play for time, didn't he? I'll play for time, all right. Come on!"

8: *Main Base*

SILENTLY, the strange Nrlanian crew surrounded the little group, including Sam Hubert. They disarmed the latter and herded them all toward the waiting ship.

"I'm not a collaborator - - nor am I Nrlanian," Hubert whispered to Shahn. "You will simply have to trust me - - "

Shahn turned his head slowly, surveying the other through narrowed eyes. "Then how do you know so much?"

"Yeah, how come?" put in Wade. "And why'd you want Meade to surrender so bad?"

Hubert smiled wryly, his eyes scanning the sky quickly. "I told you I was a specialist, Shahn."

"Shahn?" Wade frowned in puzzlement. "But I thought - - "

"Wade - hush!" admonished Lillian anxiously.

"Silence!" commanded a Nrlanian officer. "Move along quickly!"

Shahn detected a sudden, high-pitched wail from the ship, which was far above the audibility range of Terrestrials. He looked at Wade and Lillian and saw that they were unaware of it. He looked at Sam Hubert, whose face remained expressionless.

"They're receiving an alarm signal," he told them. "Perhaps your Airforce is approaching."

There was no opportunity for private comment, as they were forced to climb a steep ramp and enter the ship, yet Wade Kennedy could not repress his reaction to the other world craft.

"Holy Toledo! This is real crazy! - - a flying hallucination!"

The space craft had one main deck, circular, with a control chamber in its center and an observation dome on top. Whatever fuel or machinery there was to propel it lay unrevealed beneath their feet.

There were a number of hiber bunks on the deck, and toward these the Nrlanians led Lillian, Wade, and Sam Hubert. Shahn stood among his captors and watched Hubert closely.

"Say! What *is* this?" complained Wade. "They gonna strap us down for the kill?"

"You had better get yourselves strapped onto those bunks," advised Shahn. "Our time sense is different than yours. What is a slow bank turn to us is a high gravity pull-out to you. The bunks will help."

As a Nrlanian officer directed Lillian to lie down on the bunk, she looked back at Shahn, questioningly. "Shahn - - ?"

"It's your only chance of survival," he told her. "I'll try to get them to take it as easy as possible."

Wade strained his big muscles just once while in the grip of two Nrlanians, but he found their grip unyielding.

"He's right, Lil," he told the girl. "This is like fighting dinosaurs with a sling-shot. We better get strapped in pronto!"

As the two got onto the bunks and the Nrlanians began to strap them down, Shahn's eyes met Sam Hubert's. The latter hesitated a moment beside one of the bunks, then shrugged and lay down on it.

"Are you sure that's necessary - - for you?" asked Shahn.

"Not taking any chances," Hubert replied, as he was strapped in.

"Evidently . . "

AS THE SHIP finally leapt upward, the muffled shriek of a passing aircraft was heard outside.

"Hey!" cried Wade, though the blood had drained from his face under the pressure of acceleration. "Uncle Sam showed up, after all, Hubert!"

"They won't fire on us now," replied Sam, laboriously. "They must assume terrestrial captives may be on board - - but they'll follow us to see where we land."

"Can they keep up with us?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Wow!"

The deck of the ship blurred before Wade's eyes as it careened wildly and shot off in a new direction. Shahn strained in the hands of his captors, watching Lillian. She had fainted.

"Consider their lives!" he demanded. "I'll cooperate if you take it easy."

"You'll cooperate," smiled one of the officers coldly, "when you see what we have to show you . . "

There was no further sign that they were being followed by the new type Airforce jets. In a matter of a few minutes, the ship began to descend. It paused, hovering for a moment, as though waiting for a signal, and then suddenly dropped so abruptly that Shahn and the other Nrlanians were momentarily suspended above the deck.

When they pulled up for a landing, the passengers lying on the bunks, apparently including Sam Hubert, blacked out entirely. Shahn watched Lillian tensely but relaxed when he finally saw her turn her head and open her eyes to look at him.

He tried to smile reassuringly, but his thoughts were racing. This ship had probably arrived in one of the hiding places of Metamorph power on Earth. This is what he had been looking for. But what purpose had his captors in preserving the lives of the others?

There was no time left to conjecture. The prisoners on the bunks were promptly unstrapped, and the four of them were herded down the ramp and out of the ship.

Their first reaction to their surroundings was a studious silence as they gazed about them with a mixture of awe, incredulity, suspicion and alarm, each according to his own temperament. They had entered a mountain and now found themselves in a large subterranean chamber that housed fully ten of the interstellar craft, and which Sam Hubert in particular examined with an almost desperate concentration. A smoothly excavated tunnel gave access to other departments of the underground establishment.

"This place looks like it's been here for years," observed Wade. "Some engineering, I'd say, to carve all this out and hide all the dirt without us Earthmen knowing a thing about it."

"On our own planet," Shahn explained, "our environment required of us, at times, a semi-subterranean existence due to excessive temperatures on the surface, or excessive cold. We learned to develop very efficient means of burrowing, as we were a hibernating race." His eyes met Lillian's, but he saw reflected there no reaction to this further revelation of their differences - - only a loyal understanding - - and his heart went out to her. "You see, there was no dirt to conceal here. We use disintegrators."

"Disintig - - yipes! And I thought that's what kids got for sending in box tops. Say, how long have you antmen been around here, anyway?"

"Wade! Don't be unkind," admonished Lillian. "Shahn is not our enemy. He

is equivalent to a Prime Minister or emperor in exile."

"I should say about thirty years - - since the first ships landed," Shahn answered him.

"Well, if you're on our side," persisted Wade, "what I'd like to know is what it's all about. What do your people *really* want - - why are they biding - - and what are you trying to stop them from doing?"

The Nrlanians had been waiting for a ground vehicle, which now drew up before them, and the prisoners were directed to enter it.

"It's a long story, Wade," said Shahn. "But you may have a demonstration of what I have fought against - - before we're through."

The ground vehicle was more like a flat-bottomed excursion boat with a "domeliner" top - - as Wade described it. In spite of a load of twenty passengers, it floated lightly off the ground and darted unerringly into the tunnel shaft.

"Brother!" exclaimed Wade, hanging on to the seat in front of him. "Coney Island was never like this! How does it work?"

"You Terrestrials overlooked a great deal in magnetics," Shahn explained. "We are riding a magnetic wave much as you would ride a surf-board."

There was not much conversation for a while, as all eyes searched ahead for signs of their destination. But at times Lillian studied Shahn's face, absorbing from him the mounting tensions she knew be felt. Yet, surprisingly, she was without fear in his presence, in spite of the dark, unholy power that seemed to control their mutual destiny now. Again her instincts came to the fore, impressing upon her the conviction that this tall, proud, dark-eyed man would assert his kingly qualities and ultimately provide her with a happy solution to her untenable nightmare.

But the test of that - - and the crisis of their lives - - lay immediately ahead in the lair of the Metamorphs . . .

They arrived in a subterranean terminal and were led promptly away through an adjoining passageway into wider avenues, where hundreds of Nrlanians were in evidence.

"Hubert," said Shahn, as they walked along between their captors, "you mentioned that this was a new breed of Nrlanians. I can see that something is different about them - - but what is it?"

The Intelligence agent had altered strangely since entering the Nrlanian stronghold. He was wary, silent, broodingly preoccupied, his narrowed eyes darting everywhere, taking in every detail of his surroundings.

"Brain-washing is a good name for what ails them," he commented, crisply. "They are like drones. Their will belongs to the Metamorphs. They are also the result of accelerated incubation. They are called *drals*."

"Where did you learn all this?"

"I told you I was a sp - - "

In that moment, Lillian gasped. She put her hands out in front of her, gropingly, as though blinded. Wade Kennedy collided with a guard who had stopped in front of him, and Sam Hubert came to an abrupt halt. His eyes seemed to search about him without focussing upon anything, like a man who found himself in total darkness.

"Hey! The lights went out!" yelled Wade.

Shahn squinted at the ceiling. There were two tubes running the length of each passage. One, he could observe, was now dark, while the other glowed only with the Jansi light - - visible to Nrlanians only. As far as Earthborn humans were concerned, the tunnel was in total darkness.

The guards were observing Sam Hubert - - as was Shahn. Suddenly, one of the guards raised the butt of his sonic heater and brought it down swiftly toward Sam Hubert's head, just grazing

it, but not quite touching him. The latter did not flinch, nor did he seem to see the guard in front of him.

Just as abruptly, the regular light returned to the tunnel, and the march was resumed without explanation.

"Thought for a minute somebody forgot to pay the light bill," commented Wade, wryly. "Boy! When it gets dark down here you can *feel* it!"

"I wonder what *that* was all about?" commented Hubert, to Shahn.

"You know so much - - you should understand what happened, Sam."

"But I don't."

"Well - - they just proved you're a Terrestrial."

"How?"

"I'll explain later. It looks like we're arriving."

They came to a halt before a gate that Wade described as a "disc-valve." The ponderous metal disc slid back into a niche in the wall as they approached - - and six Nrlanian guards in dark blue uniforms met them.

"These are not *drals,*" said Sam, quickly. "They're regular Nrlanians."

Shahn glared at them haughtily, and they stared curiously back at the man who on their own world might have become Khal. The *drals* halted, and it appeared that they were not permitted beyond the gate.

"Come with us," commanded one of the new guards.

As they marched onward, Shahn questioned them in peremptory tones. "How many are there of you who choose allegiance to the Metamorphs rather than to your Khal?"

"Your questions, Shahn," replied the first Nrlanian guard who had spoken to them, "will be answered, if at all, by Lanis, himself."

"Doctor Lanis!" hissed Sam Hubert, watching Shahn.

"He seems to be the leader in this area," observed Shahn, coldly. "But where is the main Metamorph center on Earth?"

"This is Main Base," answered the guard.

"Then - - Lanis is your false Khal - - the top Metamorph?"

"He is."

"Did you hear *that*?" said Hubert, tensely. "This is the main center, Shahn! At last! - - you have led us to it!"

Shahn's brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"How did I do that? And who is *us?*"

"Don't you understand? For a long time I've had you under observation, hoping you would make them show their hand - - even before you called on Dalaney that night in the Hollywoodland Hills. And by *us* - - I mean the United States Airforce, chum!"

"Hey!" exclaimed Wade. "Uncle Sam couldn't know where we are now - - or *could* he?"

"You bet your sweet life he does!" enthused Hubert. "Those new ships are well equipped. They can trace these tunnels from the air. It's all they needed."

"All they needed?" asked the Nrlanian spokesman. "For what?"

"For planting a good-sized hydrogen bomb. Under these conditions, I don't mind being expendable!"

"Holy mackerel!" ejaculated Wade, proudly.

Lillian's widened eyes sought Sam's. "They wouldn't?" she gasped, experiencing a shock of claustrophobia.

Shahn thought: He's hedging. He said we must play for time. That bomb remark is merely rhetorical.

Sam shrugged, and the guard laughed.

"*You* may be expendable," said the latter, "but I doubt if your fair cities of Hollywood and greater Los Angeles are. You are now directly beneath the Hollywoodland Hills. Moreover, we are quite aware of those new planes. They can be eliminated any time we choose."

"I'm afraid not," countered Hubert. "We're familiar with your magnetic disruptors and are completely shielded."

The officer was caught off guard by this remark, as were his five companions. They paled, looking from Hubert to Shahn.

Shahn smiled. "Perhaps I am still the only one who can save your skins now," he said to them. "The Earthmen have caught up to you. As your true Khal, I can negotiate through this United States agent - - if you will turn your allegiance back into the human path. All is not yet lost to our race. You must decide before it is forever too late."

The guards besitated, but at last their leader composed himself. "You may have shields against the disruptors," he said, "but not against the *real* weapon. I don't suppose you know that your precious General Morrison is dead."

"General Morrison - - of the Strategic Air Command? But - - I just talked to him tonight!" Hubert insisted.

The guard sneered. "You were speaking to a Metamorph. And *he* is in command of those radiation-engined aircraft, so you see your plans have reversed upon you. You have spared us the necessity of using spacecraft - - as the terrestrial craft, are actually in our service, providing us witb what in your own tactical jargon is known as an air umbrella against real interference."

"But hey! Those pilots wouldn't obey any Meta-mumpus - - or whatever you call it!" complained Wade.

"They would obey General Morrison," returned the guard, "and to all appearances he *is* General Morrison. So you see, there is really no defense, Shahn - - it is futile - - and you, too, must learn to serve the new order . . "

Lillian burst into tears and threw herself into Shahn's arms. "Shahn! Sbahn!" she cried out. "Is there no hope left in this world for us? There *has* to be, Shahn! Tell me there is - - because the *next* world is lost forever!"

Shahn held her close, as he glared at the guards. Wade's mouth dropped open in amazement as he observed Lillian. At first, hurt jealousy clouded his eyes. Then his big mouth tightened in resignation.

"Aw for crying out loud!" he blurted out. "I give up! What's next!"

Sam Hubert stared at Shahn in silent deliberation. His thougbts were deep, sharp and inexpressible, for reasons which he could share with no one at the moment . . .

9: *Indoctrination*

THE GROUP of captives arrived now at a T-shaped junction of passageways, and here was another disc-gate. before which stood a single Nrlanian in ordinary Terrestrial clothing. His eyes were only on Shahn, and as the latter approached he nodded with a mixed expression of cynicism and feigned deference.

"Welcome, Shahn," he said quietly. "I am instructed to show you something before you see Lanis." The man turned to the guards and said, in Nrlanian, "Take the prisoners to First Stage."

"Wait!" demanded Shahn, sharply. "We will not be separated."

The other smiled, with a slight shrug. "We have no need here for melodramatics - - no dictatorship. You will find our ways and our purposes quite reasonable. Your friends may accompany you to see what you have to see - - but it is a personal thing. If you are willing to be emotionally disrobed, as it were, in public - - it is up to you. But I have attempted to spare you that."

Lillian's fear-darkened eyes sought Shahn's, her hand slipping into his, pleadingly. "I'll be with you, Shahn," she murmured.

Wade could only stand there dumbfoundedly watching the two. But Sam Hubert was not to be excluded.

"I'm with you, Shahn," he said. "Let's face it together, whatever it is."

The Nrlanian agent waved his hands in a sign of resignation. He pressed a wall stud, and the disc-gate slid silently

into a niche, revealing a seemingly endless passageway.

"Bring them all," he ordered, to the guards. Without further conversation, he led the way.

They had not walked far before he stopped before a small door in the wall of the corridor. He paused, his hand half raised before a small lighted square panel.

"Prepare yourself for a shock," he said, almost coldly. He passed his hand before the lighted square, and the door shot downward into the floor. He pointed inside a dimly lighted chamber, inviting them to enter.

"Watch for a trap," whispered Hubert, placing a restraining hand on Shahn's arm.

The Nrlanian agent smiled faintly. "Very illogical," he corrected. "If any traps were reserved for you - - you might well call your capture, in itself, a trap. You are in our hands. Why elaborate upon an established condition? But - - if you insist - - " He stepped into the room first.

Shahn, Lillian, Hubert and Wade Kennedy followed, the guards entering behind them.

There was a screen of greenish light. Beyond it, sitting on a crude stone bench before a stone table, was a man - - a tall, broad-shouldered man with deep-set gray eyes. On his broad brow was the twin scar symbol of the Khals.

"*Vrulnus!*" cried Shahn hoarsely. "Vrulnus!" He rushed forward.

"Stop!" cried the Nrlanian agent, stepping in front of him with mercurial swiftness. "The screen will kill you!"

Sam Hubert's strong hand was on Shahn's trembling shoulder, steadying him, holding him back.

"Vrulnus!" Shahn cried out again. "Beloved Khal! - - I *knew* you lived! I have found you at last! Thanks to Eternity - - thanks to Ao! - - now all things are possible!"

Lillian looked wonderingly from Shahn's greenish, sweat-glistening face to the face of the great Khal of whom she had heard so much. As Vrulnus lifted up his head to look at them, she saw that his eyes were dull and listless. There was that in his tired face which caused her heart to sink within her.

"Vrulnus! Can't you hear me?" pleaded Shahn. "This is Shahn - - your devoted disciple of Nrlan!"

Slowly, Vrulnus spoke, in the hollow tones of a hopeless man. "Well do I hear you, Shahn. And I see you there, standing straight and proud as the Khal I might have made you. You have found me at last, after the endless years and the terrible journey, and the waiting - - the hoping and striving. But this is not victory, Shahn - - " Vrulnus' great frame trembled. His gray eyes misted over. "Not victory, Shahn. The olden dream is lost forever. We must do *their* bidding."

Shahn straightened, his eyes blazing a full measure of rage and hate "What have they done to you!" he cried out. "The dream you taught me, Vrulnus - - the secret dream of the race. It is not done - - because *I* am here beside you. And we shall *not* do their bidding!"

Suddenly, the Nrlanian agent signalled to the guards. "That is all," he said. "We shall leave."

Before the Terrestrials present were aware of Shahn's desperate movement, three of the guards lay senseless on the floor. In the next instant, Shahn was standing there with a sonic heater in each hand, burning the other three guards into ashes.

Lillian lunged toward Wade, groaning in horror, but Wade could only stand there with Hubert, his brows raised in petrified incomprehension. There was a suffocating stench of burned cloth and flesh in the room.

Shahn whirled, his teeth flashing, the heaters aimed at the Nrlanian agent. "Release that screen!" he demanded.

"You are overlooking one grave con-

tingency," replied the latter, calmly. As he spoke, he faded from view and a darkening mist gathered in the room.

"A Metamorph!" cried Sam Hubert. In the deepening darkness, he bent over, as though trying to find something in his clothing. Then he fell to the floor, as did Lillian and Wade.

Cold vertigo seized Shahn, and he saw nothing momentarily but the bright red glow of the wall where his heavy heaters expended terrible forces. Then he, too, succumbed to an insupportable weight that crushed his mind downward into darkness . . .

* * * * * *

STAGE ONE was indoctrination. The Communists would have been proud of it, as Wade Kennedy expressed it. All was kindness, cooperation, and "brotherly love." Its outstanding feature was that its activities were devoted principally to the indoctrination of Terrestrials who had been captured on one pretext or another from all walks of life. In fact, many of them were kidnapped public officials whose places in the outer world had been taken over by Metamorphs.

Just why Shahn was subjected to Stage One processing was not quite clear, but Lillian was glad of it because it kept him at her side. Sullen, brooding deeply over his experience with Vrulnus, contemptuous of his captors - - he was dangerous, yet he was permitted to attend one of the "meetings" in the Stage One assembly chamber.

The man who addressed them was a city councilman from Chicago. He was big, square-shouldered, beefy, fattened by both propaganda and the fruits thereof.

"He'd be complete," grumbled Wade to Lillian, "if he had boots and a star and crescent."

"Shut up!" protested an already indoctrinated listener in a seat behind him. The latter was a square-faced, blunt-fisted truck-driver from San Pedro.

Wade grinned at him. "I been pushed around by these Narlayneeans, buddy, but *you're* different." His grin faded abruptly. "You keep your yap shut or I'll laminate it!"

The man scowled back, but he subsided for a moment. A few other roughs in the same row put their heads together with the truck-driver, nodding darkly toward Wade. Sam Hubert caught Lillian's eye and winked at her. She hung her head, too disorientated and distraught to be mortified. Shahn stared calculatingly at the Terrestrial speaker on the stage.

"Before we advance to Stage Two," announced the latter pontifically, "which is programming our organized activities in the outer world - - I'll bring some of the newcomers up to date. Incidentally - - " He looked disdainfully at Shahn. "We have an extremely important personage with us tonight. I am not permitted to divulge his identity at present, but I assure you - - " sarcastically - - "we should be honored and impressed."

Heads turned, faces gawked. Shahn kept his eyes steadfastly on the speaker, stern and expressionless, which only served to emphasize his kingly bearing.

"Now, to summarize," the councilman continued, briskly. "The position of Earthmen with relation to the Nrlanian invasion is quite simply and logically stated. Number one: There is nothing that can be done about the Metamorphs and the mutation. That is a point I'll explain and prove, but it is a premise you will have to accept for the moment. Number two: Only Nrlanians are involved. The Metamorphs demand nothing but our cooperation - - whereas they could wipe us off the face of the Earth if they chose to do so. Number three: The single objective of the Metamorphs is to find the hidden Nrlanians - - everywhere - - round them up, and organize them for the mutation they must go through eventually, anyway, because they're built that way. In this

task, they are enlisting the aid of Earthmen. Number four: in exchange for our cooperation they will gradually place collaborators in advantageous positions of power and influence - - "

"*You lie!*"

All eyes turned to see Shahn rise slowly to his feet with clenched fists, his nostrils distended in rage.

"You're a pusillanimous, ignorant, fattened, expendable tool of master minds!" he shouted through his teeth. "You know nothing about it! Look ahead - - Earthman! Look ahead at the time when you will have aided the Metamorphs in fully achieving their purpose. Given perfect conditions, they will multiply through accelerated mutation - - and they will be *hungry* - - millions of them!" He turned swiftly, glaring at the assembly. "Do you know what constitutes *food* for the Metamorphs? - - for your so benevolent masters?"

He stopped, looking about him dumbfoundedly. Everyone, including Lillian, Wade, and Sam Hubert, was holding his head as though in pain. When he stopped, however, the source of their pain abated.

"Mister Meade," said the speaker, quietly.

Shahn turned and glared at him.

"Just as there are sounds which are audible to your ears alone, so there are sounds in the lower audibility range of Terrestrials which you do not register. This particular combination of discords is very painful to Earthly ears. Unfortunately, your voice was drowned out, as you are not permitted to speak here. Your time will come - - so please bear with us, hm-m-m?"

Shahn said nothing more, considering the man on the stage unworthy of his further attention. He sat down, resolved to wait his turn.

"Why, the dirty sonofa - - " Wade started to say.

"Shut up!!!" came a chorus from the rear.

Wade turned to face five rough-looking characters instead of one. He smiled, fascinated. Almost with a childish expression of curiosity, he reached out and tweaked the San Pedro man's nose with artistic and studied deliberation.

"Wade!" Lillian hissed at him.

Two men instantly grabbed Wade and the largest one of the five rose to strike him. Wade let out a war whoop and leapt into the row behind him. He flattened two of his tormentors with as many blows. More joined in, but then Sam Hubert went into battle.

When the Nrlanian guards, dull-witted *drals*, came running into the assembly chamber, Shahn rose up in hungering wrath. Bedlam ensued, until suddenly a siren sounded and a blinding light flashed intermittently from the stage.

Wade, Sam and Shahn paused over prostrate foes to observe the presence of three blue-uniformed true Nrlanian guardsmen there, one of whom was an officer. The latter held in his hand a Nrlanian torch-beam, which he snapped off when he had gained everyone's attention. On either side of him, his companions held sonic heaters aimed at the assembly.

"Order!" shouted the officer, scowling. "Or be burned down at once - - do you hear?"

Shahn stepped forward unhesitatingly and came to a stop below the stage, facing them. "This farce has gone far enough!" he snapped at them, imperiously. "You know who I am. Take me to Lanis at once!"

The officer sneered down at him. "Yes, I know who you are. Great Lanis, Khal of the Metamorphs, has been busy elsewhere. He will see you now."

"Wait a minute," said Hubert, coming up behind Shahn. "Believe me, Shahn - - it is vital that I go with you. Bargain for it!"

"Don't leave me here, Shahn!" pleaded Lillian, running to his side and clinging to his arm.

"How about me?" grinned Wade, striding up, sporting a proud shiner and a missing tooth.

Shahn looked at his three companions gravely, then up at the officers. "They will accompany me," he said.

"I don't think - - " the officer began.

"Correct!" snapped Shahn. "You *don't* think! You obey! You all want something which even the Metamorphs seek in me - - the *sarniall*. Well, do as I say or take my corpse! I am done. Now lead the way. . "

The dumbfounded survivors of the brawl in the assembly hall stared from Shahn to the officer, including the rather pasty-hued councilman from Chicago. The Nrlanian tensed, pressed his lips together, then turned abruptly.

"Follow me," he said.

The guards with the heaters stepped aside, their weapons trained on Shahn.

"Come on," said Shahn, and his companions fell in wordlessly behind him.

WHILE en route to their new destination, Sam Hubert caught Wade's private ear for a word of advice.

"Wade, you're a war veteran. You've seen combat, haven't you?"

"Yeah. So?"

"In a defended position, why is it the small arms and light artillery are usually fired first?"

"That's easy. The big guns hold fire until they're needed, so's to conceal their positions."

"Exactly. In a way, you're a big gun, defense-wise. Did you notice in that fight back there that quite a few were on *our* side?"

"I didn't have time. Were there some?"

"Yes. This thing can be split wide open - - perhaps not soon, but eventually."

"No kidding. So I'm a big gun, am I?"

"Consider it that way. Hold your fire until the right time, lest you attract the heaviest fire of the enemy prematurely. Don't be conspicuous. Hold your tongue and your temper - - but keep your eyes and ears open."

Wade scratched his head. "By that token, you must be atomic ordnance. Boy! Did *you* lay those guys out fast! Say, what about that H-bomb business? Do you think - - "

"We're not out of *that* danger yet." Sam clapped him on the shoulder. "Quiet, friend. Here we are."

They were admitted into a dimly illuminated room which was richly appointed, with deep carpeting and upholstered furniture. Save for the total absence of books, it might have been a private study in a wealthy home. There was a wide-top mahogany desk and a tall-backed leather swivel chair - - empty.

"I don't like this room," whispered Lillian.

"That's understandable," returned Hubert. "We are in the presence of another Metamorph - - perhaps Lanis - - "

Shahn looked at him sharply. "How do you know that?"

Hubert shrugged. "I've seen this kind of dimness in a room before. So have you."

In that moment, the lamps in the room brightened, and simultaneously the tenuous darkness condensed in the direction of the swivel chair. Lillian gripped both Shahn and Wade, trying not to cry out, as the three dimensional, faceless shadow of a man materialized behind the desk. Then she did cry out as the shadow became that same little cherubic-faced man with the twinkling blue eyes and the goatee whom she had seen capture Shahn at the hospital.

"Doctor Lanis!" she exclaimed, horrified.

Lanis waved his hands in a most cheerful and disarming manner. "I did that deliberately," he said, "to prove a point. The point is - - there is no camouflage here. We will face only the truth. I am a Metamorph. As such, my objectives are clearly defined - - my terms with regard to yourselves are simple and just. You are here to learn what

they are."

"I know what they are," said Shahn, coldly. "You want the sarniall - - and the lives of my friends here is the price you offer."

"Correct in the first part - - wrong as to the latter," replied Lanis.

"But - - if the Metamorphs want the sarniall," put in Lillian, "why don't they get it from Vrulnus, who was its original inventor?"

"A point I was going to make, myself," added Hubert.

"We tried," said Lanis, expressionlessly. "But our only persuasion, in this case, was mental and physical torture. He broke, mentally. He seems incapable of building the sarniall now."

Shahn's face hardened under the strain of controlling his emotions. "Leave Vrulnus alone," he said. "If I can buy *his* freedom, you may have the sarniall and myself, as well."

Wade frowned at Shahn. "Hey! You mean you'd play ball with these Metamuppuses?"

"Silence!" commanded Lanis. "Shahn, I will get to the point. There is no need to threaten you or your companions with death, as the alternative. Capable people are always worth more alive than dead - - to any cause. But here is my proposition. I want the sarniall. Build it, and your reward shall be precisely this: Vrulnus and yourself free - - but exiled from Earth. We'll give you a star ship and the time necessary to locate a desirable objective in some other solar system."

Lillian, who still held on to Shahn's arm, felt him tense.

"And the alternative?" he asked.

Lanis shrugged. "We shall perform further experiments upon Vrulnus. He may be able to work under hypnosis. If our method fails, he may become a raving lunatic."

Shahn looked at his companions. "A dilemma fiendish enough to become classical," he commented, gravely, his eyes mostly on Lillian. "My prime objective has been to find Vrulnus, and now to rescue him. Yet, the price for this is to make the Metamorphs invulnerable. This is equivalent to offering them Earth on a platter - - in exchange for Vrulnus."

"That is about the size of it," put in Sam Hubert. "What do you choose, Shahn?"

His eyes were still on Lillian when he answered, "I choose - - Vrulnus."

Lanis smiled. Hubert remained expressionless, watching the Metamorph. Lillian's eyes never left Shahn's, but she cried silently, looking at him.

"Well," said Wade, abruptly, *"that* separates the men from the boys! You're a traitor to Earth, Shahn. They can do with me what they want, hut you can count me on the other side - - *my* side. I hate your guts!"

Sam Hubert cleared his throat. "Lanis," he said, "I am a physicist. Since Shahn's decision in this matter seems irrevocable, the damage is already done. Therefore, I'd like to earn the right to become an exile on that star ship. I am volunteering to he Shahn's assistant. After all, I'm familiar with sources of special materials, scientific equipment - - "

"Quisling!" cried Lillian, as she slapped Sam Hubert's face.

"Lil," said Wade, putting his arm around her. "To each his own, haby. Don't waste your strength."

Lillian broke into uncontrollable sobbing. "You don't understand, Wade! You don't - - understand!"

He had to hold her in his arms to keep her from falling to the floor. As Shahn stood there looking at Sam Hubert and at Lanis, his face was a colorless mask of death . . .

Hubert walked over and put his hand on Shahn's shoulder, facing Lillian. "Lillian," he said, quietly, "I'm afraid it is *you* who do not understand."

She looked up at him, startled, re-

sentful, through streaming tears. Shahn watched Hubert warily.

"I would ask you," said the latter, carefully, "to examine the meaning of courage - - which is to hold on, and to strive, beyond the boundaries of hope." He glared at her meaningfully. "I believe you have that courage. . "

When Shahn looked again at Lillian, their eyes met - - and held.

Wade wrinkled his brow in puzzlement and muttered, "Hub?"

10: *Rospor*

SHAHN wiped sweat off his emaciated brow. He looked across the lab assembly bench at Sam Hubert.

"Just who the hell *are* you?" he demanded.

Hubert switched off an oscilloscope and disconnected it from the nearly completed sarniall. He raised his brows in mild surprise.

"What brought all that on?" he asked. "You know who I am. Of course we haven't had the leisure to go into all of my past - - but I was a nuclear physicist before I - - ah - - became vitally interested in flying saucers."

The long weeks of pressure and worry about Lillian had drained Shahn visibly. The girl and Wade had been sent back to Stage One, and he and Hubert had been isolated in the laboratory area.

"I'm not insensitive or stupid," retorted Shahn, glaring at him. "You have a hidden motive in helping me with the sarniall. You're an abnormally brilliant scientist, and you're too clever to wear real motives on your sleeve. The connection with the U. S. Airforce Intelligence is a cover-up."

Hubert took a big breath. He gave Shahn a warning frown, reminding him of a previous agreement they had made to avoid vital topics. The lab, he was sure, must be "bugged."

"All right," be lied, cheerfully, "I'll come clean with you, Shahn. "I've been trying to get hold of a flying saucer. Sound silly?"

Shahn studied him a moment, not knowing just how far he was carrying the camouflage for the possible delusion of monitors - - or of himself.

"Perhaps not," he shrugged. "It would mean a lot to terrestrial science."

"But I want it for myself. This world needs new horizons. I want to visit Earth's neighboring planets."

"I see. And as a substitute for your personal objective, you seek to become an exile with Vrulnus and myself - - but we are not interested in your neighboring planets. Mars is dying of old age. Venus is a steaming, smouldering infant. The rest are dead or unborn."

"All the better, then, that I should visit the stars with you."

Shahn frowned a warning at Hubert. "And never see Earth again?"

Hubert gazed about the lab surreptitiously. "Don't you intend to return again - - for vengeance?"

Accident or deliberate plant? Shahn wondered at his strange companion. Quite loudly and clearly, he replied, "That would be futile. Soon the Metamorphs will have established themselves as the dominant mutation here. In a way, it isn't their fault. It is the same process of Nature which placed *homo sapiens* here as the dominant mutation over the apes. This is only one small planet lost in Infinity. Vrulnus and I can find another home."

"It would be worth the rest of my life to help you find it, Shahn."

Shahn returned to his work. "Then we'll have to earn that trip and finish the weapon. The sooner the better. There's no use fighting against the local situation here on Earth. I am done with it."

Both men fell to work in silence, realizing that they had not answered a single question in their minds with respect to each other. It had all been for the benefit of their captors, should they be eavesdropping. The principal question in Hubert's mind was: He's bringing this weapon rapidly to completion.

What are his plans when he actually finishes it? Does he *really* intend giving it to the enemy?

Shahn wondered much about Hubert, but in his own mind there was no major question - - only an unfamiliar prayer to unknown Ao: That Lillian was safe, and that the Metamorphs would refrain from tampering further with the fabulous mind of Vrulnus. There were certain priceless secrets still extant in that noble cranium - - without which his own dream of life and hope was dead.

Both he and Sam Hubert shared one conviction in common. At the moment the sarniall was ready, the enemy would be there to receive it. If any counteraction was planned, it would bave to occur at that precise moment. . .

STAGE TWO indoctrinees were allowed to use the visiscopes. Wade and Lillian had already looked upon Hollywood in the screens. They could not help but wonder at the blindness of the outer world, which blandly carried on its complex, materialistic existence oblivious to the doom that was being prepared for it.

But one night they discovered a startling change in the outer world. They were with a small group, unaccompanied by their tutors, for whom they had been instructed to wait. To kill time, Wade turned on the 'scope, and the huge screen on the wall came to life.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "Looks like an air raid!"

Lillian looked up listlessly to see searchlights combing the skies of Hollywood and Los Angeles.

"If it's an air raid," commented a weather-wizened rancher from Ventura, "what good are searchlights? Even radar would be short notice these days."

"Can't be advertising," said another. "Not like that - - all over town."

Wade flipped on the sound system at low volume, and at once they heard the mournful wail of sirens. Everybody looked at each other significantly.

"It *must* be an emergency of some kind," said Lillian, finally. "Can you magnify the screen, Wade?"

Wade spun a dial, and Vine Street leapt at them in full detail. They observed the intersection of Sunset and Vine. The streets were overcrowded with traffic, but it was a kind of traffic they had not witnessed before - - not, at least, at Sunset and Vine.

Buses, trucks, autos, motorcycles - - even bicycles towing make-shift trailers - - moved slowly between military trucks, weapons carriers and jeeps. Every vehicle available moved toward the Hollywood Freeway, filled to maximum capacity with men, women, children, and personal belongings. Still more people fought to find room in the public vehicles, pulling out bundles and articles of furniture to get in. The sidewalks were littered with cast-off items, and the yelling masses clambered over them heedlessly, watching for their chance to get transportation on the outbound freeway, toward Pomona, Santa Ana, Pasadena, El Monte - - anywhere, just so it was out of Hollywood.

Wade whistled. "They aren't just practising," he said. "That's wholesale evacuation if I ever saw it!"

Lillian clutched at his arm. "But why, Wade? Why!"

He shrugged. "You heard what Sam Hubert said about an H-bomb. Maybe the big brass is afraid it might happen."

"We gotta get outta here!" wailed an aging blonde woman who might have been a B-girl in her time. "It ain't safe!"

While a general tumult arose and people began to plead with the *dral* guards to let them go, Wade stared tbougbtfully at the scene on the screen.

"It might not be so safe here, at that," he muttered. "The objective wouldn't be the city - - it would be the Metamumps - - their buried crystals or whatever you call them."

Lillian watched Wade's face, fascinated by a mounting fear. "Chrysalides," she corrected. "That's exactly it, Wade! And who could know this is their Main

Base - - but Sam Hubert! Wade - - somehow, Sam Hubert is directing an attack on this place!"

"What are you talking about? How could he?"

"I don't know - - but he is!"

"Oh, oh! Instincts again! They never fail!"

"Then *believe* me, Wade. We've got to find him!"

"What for? I think it's a good idea to blast this creep joint off the map."

"But Shahn! We must warn him!"

"*That* no good, chicken - - "

"Wade, please! You don't know - - it means *more* than life - - to *me!*"

Wade's temper burst its bonds. "You're nuts!" he fumed. "For once you're gonna do it my way. We're busting out!" He turned to a half dozen men who had been watching the screen, and to others who were arguing with the guards. "Hey! You want out - - follow me!" He pulled Lillian with him, and the men followed. Briefly, he let go of her, as he threw himself on the men surrounding the guards, pushing them on top of the *drals*. "Smother those guys!" he yelled. "Get their guns!"

The six men with him dog-piled the mass of humanity pressing upon the *drals,* and the latter were incapacitated by the sheer weight of numbers.

Wade piled in over their shoulders and came up with a sonic heater. He waved it over his head and grabbed Lillian again. "Come on!" he yelled. "Don't stop for anything! Just keep going!"

THE FINAL assembly of the sarniall had been arranged for a very special audience in the Main Base conference chamber. The sarniall, devoid of its final activating circuit assembly, lay on a table before three tiers of seats. On these latter sat a group of men who might have just walked out of the New York Stock Exchange - - distinguished looking citizens all. Yet they were leading Metamorphs.

Their leader, Lanis, sat on a raised dais before a broad desk, but not in human form. He was a dense, faceless man-shadow.

At the assembly table stood Shahn and Hubert. Beside the sarniall were several small parts awaiting assembly. At a sign from dark Lanis, a guard handed Shahn a Nrlanian welder, powered by the same "infra-battery" which Shahn had sold to the Jonathan Corporation.

"Begin the final assembly," ordered Lanis, in hollow, sepulchral tones. "But remember this - - one false move, and you, alone, Shahn, know how you will die."

Boldly, Hubert asked aloud, almost ingenuously, "How will we die, Shahn?"

Shahn was already at work. "As food," he said, just as boldly. "This is a room full of Metamorphs."

"You mean - - " Sam looked up at the assemblage of distinguished-looking gentlemen. "Our flesh?"

"No."

"Then *what?*"

"Have you ever heard of the *elan vital?*"

"Silence!" commanded Lanis.

In that moment, however, five Nrlanian guards pushed into the chamber led by a Metamorph shadow. With them were two struggling prisoners.

Shahn looked up, tensing. "Lillian! Wade!"

"Seize Shahn and his terrestrial accomplice!" cried the newly arrived Metamorph. "This is an emergency!"

Lanis' shadow rose up in macabre silence and stood there as guards pulled Shahn and Hubert away from the table.

"Explain yourself, Ralnor," said Lanis, evenly.

"The outside is being evacuated. A hydrogen bomb attack is feared. These two - - " He indicated Lillian and Wade. "Have knowledge of it which involves this Earthman, Hubert. They are also guilty of inciting a riot and inadvertently broke into the *crypt!*"

Wade, ragged and dirty, snarling hate,

yelled at Hubert. "It's their tomb! All their crystals are in there - - " A guard struck him and he staggered.

Lillian, equally disheveled but somehow wildly determined to resist, now that she saw Shahn, cried out, "And there's a giant star ship!"

Shahn waited no longer. He broke free, leapt to the table and slapped the small welded circuit assembly into the sarniall. A heat ray crackled, but Lanis shouted, "No!" In the instant that the sonic heater clicked off, Lanis assumed human form - - but not the form of the cherubic faced little man.

Towering before them was Vrulnus, himself.

"Shahn," he said, smiling sardonically into the teeth of the sarniall, "would you destroy your Khal?"

"You - -!" cried Shahn, incredulously. "A Metamorph!"

"The same as the one you talked to so touchingly in his prison cell. What of our dream of life now, Shahn?"

Lillian held her temples, trying not to break. Her widened eyes could not leave that noble face that deceived the mind and the senses.

"It was a trick!" snarled Shahn. "You are not Vrulnus - - never were!"

"Then perhaps - - *this* you will believe," said the image of Vrulnus. "*This* I really was when you knew me last."

When the shape of Vrulnus changed to that of a tall, thin man, Shahn could only remember the other's murderous laughter on another world centuries before, when Sralna had died in the grip of a Metamorph.

"*Rospor!*" he shouted, forgetting the sarniall entirely. With a choking cry of murderous rage, he sprang for the dais . .

11: *Death Stand*

SHAHN landed in the spot which had been occupied by Rospor, but it was empty. The entire assemblage of distinguished looking gentlemen had dissolved into swirling shadows that now converged upon him with a cold, cloying touch of death beyond death - - and Shahn, paralyzed, began to lose the color of life.

"Shahn!" screamed Lillian. She broke loose from the guards and ran to him, clinging to him in spite of the indescribable horror of the death that embraced them both.

Wade Kennedy struggled mightily in the grip of the five guards, shouting hoarsely. "Lillian! For the love of God - - no!"

"Away!" shouted Sam Hubert, suddenly picking up the sarniall and running to the dais. He activated it, taking care to aim its dark forces above the slumping bodies of Shahn and Lillian.

Instantly, most of the chilling death shadows swirled away from the deadly area, yet one great shadow held stubbornly to the bodies of its two victims. Sam Hubert stepped deliberately within the influence of the Metamorph, the while he reached for his artificial leg. With his bare hand, he tore apart his trouser leg, and there was revealed a glistening instrument of steel, wire and glowing tubes. Surprised and suddenly wary of its life, the single remaining Metamorph dissolved into nothingness. Before the Nrlanian guards could bring their heaters to bear on Hubert, the entire dais was surrounded by a pale blue shield of energy.

At his feet, Shahn and Lillian revived slowly, looking about them, mystified, at the dome of energy which protected them. Shahn struggled weakly to his feet, pulling Lillian up with him. His eyes were for Hubert, alone, as the latter, grimly holding the sarniall in his hands, inspected the deeper shadows of the council chamber.

"Who are you?" asked Shahn.

"Guards!" shouted Hubert in a new, deep tone of authority. "You have witnessed the power of your Khal!" Wherewith, he tore from his forehead a strip of false flesh, and there gleamed forth the twin white scars of Vrulnus, Khal of Nrlan.

"*Vrulnus!*" cried Shahn. "Vrulnus!

- - at last!"

Lillian stared, dry-eyed, then buried her head in Shahn's willing arms. Relief came in a tidal wave - - as devastating as all the fears and torments which had preceded it.

The true Nrlanian guards in the room lowered their weapons and, instinctively, they kneeled down.

"Vrulnus!" exclaimed their commanding officer. "Forgive us! We thought you were dead! Without you, great Khal, there was no hope!"

"But - - Vrulnus!" protested Shahn, overcome hy the confusion of his mixed emotions. "You hid your identity from *me*! Why!"

"There is no time, Shahn. That homh threat is real. Come on! Stay within my shield!"

As he moved, the shield moved with him, generated hy the marvelous instrument in his artificial limh. "Guards," he ordered, "you will recruit your forces - - scatter among the peoples of the Earth - - and resist the work of the Metamorphs - - until I return."

"But where will you go, Khal?" asked the leading officer.

"That is my secret. I have but waited to find my own ship, which Rospor stole from me on Nrlan. It is in the *crypt*. Thanks to you, Wade Kennedy, my time for action did not come too late."

"Well - - whatever the hell's going on count me in!" said Wade.

Abruptly, the energy shield dropped. Vrulnus stepped to Wade's side, and the shield reappeared.

"Stay inside this," said Vrulnus, "in case *they* return."

"You mean - - the Metamumps can't get through this?"

"They cannot. Now tell me - - where is the crypt of the chrysalides - - and my ship?"

WITH the advent of the genuine Vrulnus, the aspect of the world seemed to change. Shahn walked proud and straight behind him, and his grip on Lillian's hand was firm and confident. Wade Kennedy, leading the way with the Nrlanian guards, called cheerfully to every fugitive Terrestrial who chanced to run into their path.

"Join the parade! The war's over! Come on!"

Or other Nrlanians who would have opposed them quickly recognized their undisputed leader and turned their allegiance to him. Sporadic attacks on the part of the Metamorph conditioned *drals* were met with a withering fire on the part of the loyalist forces that were swiftly gathering. By the time they neared the crypt, their party numhered nearly a hundred of mixed Terrestrials and Nrlanians.

"Are we getting out of here?" some of them asked.

"What about the H-bomh?"

"Who's this hig guy with the 'space gun' in his hands?"

"I don't get it, hut if this is out, count me in!"

"Where are the Metamorphs all this time?"

Wade turned and shouted to all Terrestrials present. "You jokers take it easy! Follow the leader close now - - this ain't no picnic yet. The Metamumps have gone back into their shells - - in this tomh ahead."

Some who could not dominate their fear of the Metamorphs dropped out of the group at this point. The rest quieted down, watching Vrulnus in wondering fear and hope.

"I'm sorry about your leg," Shahn said to the Khal. "How did it happen?"

Vrulnus gripped the sarniall tightly, looking ahead. "It was no accident," he answered. "It was high-priced surgery."

Shahn looked abruptly at Lillian, then hack at Vrulnus, incredulous. "You mean - - you - - "

Vrulnus cut him off with a piercing surveillance. "How *else* was I to smuggle my weapon into the enemy's midst?"

Words deserted Shahn. He could not have done justice to his admiration for his leader's iron courage and will. He

and Lillian followed the great Khal in silent awe and enraptured deference.

Shahn had a thousand questions on bis lips, but just now there loomed before them a lightless tunnel mouth in the depths of the Metamorph lair. A discgate at the entrance bad been melted apart by sonic heaters.

"It lights up - - kinda," said Wade, "after you get into it. Then there's a giant cave - - " He gulped once, looking at Vrulnus. "And that's - - the place. ."

"The crypt of the chrysalides," muttered someone fearfully.

"The Metamorphs - - waiting in their graves. . "

"Their backs against the wall. . "

"They'll fight, won't they?"

"Hey, I'm getting out of here!"

Vrulnus turned slowly to face them all. His gray eyes seemed to search each sub-cellar of their minds. "You are all indispensable," be said. "You of Nrlan are experienced. You know the strength of the Metamorph and you have seen *my* strength. You are now my own chosen deputies on Earth. You will establish secret connections with the rest of our kind and form cells of resistance - - until I return.

"You Terrestrials are also experienced. You know now what danger threatens you. You will form an alliance with my people to fight your common foe. Your fight will be a delaying action - - until I return prepared for the final battle. But just now - - at least *these* shall be destroyed." He nodded his bead toward tbe tunnel.

Without further speedh, he turned and entered tbe forbidding shadows. Slowly, the others followed, while Shahn. Lillian and Wade remained close beside the great man, remembering his protective energy shield.

"You can't kill a Metamorph," somebody complained.

"This guy can. That gun - - it destroys their projections, anyway," said another.

"But not their shells. Nothing can destroy a chrysalide."

"Not even an H-bomb?"

"Hey! How about that?"

Once more, the deep voice of Vrulnus was heard in the dimness of the tunnel. "I am controlling that," he answered. "But we must hurry."

"Hurry? To what? There's no exit down here."

"There must be. My ship is here."

"Good! Then why hurry, if you're running the whole show?"

"Don't forget - - there are other Metamorph bases - - and other Nrlanian ships. My pilots cannot shield us indefinitely from outside attack."

Shahn could not suppress his curiosity. "*Your* pilots? But I thought - - General Morrison - - "

"I have used my years well on Earth, Shahn, preparing for this moment. Those Airforce pilots are Nrlanians - - my own men. The moment I was told Morrison had been replaced by a Metamorph, I took direct command."

Shahn thought: *How?*

And Vrulnus' own powerful thought returned: *Have you' forgotten, Shahn?*

"Telepathy!" be blurted out.

The conversation was getting beyond the comprehension of the multitude that followed. A child-like, trustful silence on their part ensued, except for one insuppressible reaction.

"I think I'm gonna flip!"

In tbe darkness, Wade's gravel-toned voice was readily recognized by Shahn and Lillian. They caught themselves smiling incongruously in the sub-cellars of hell.

Abruptly, the dimly illuminated crypt opened before them . . .

THE giant cave arched above their beads into impenetrahle shadows. Its floor fell away into a broad basin some fifty feet below them. Dimly seen in the distance was the shadowy hull of a giant star ship.

But in between them and their goal, on the floor of the cave, lay fully thirty black, gleaming chrysalides, swollen, pet-

rified caricatures of the human form.

Lillian gasped, eyes wide in fascinated horror, biting her knuckles in an effort to stifle a scream.

"God preserve us!" someone whispered.

"The living shells of the Metamorphs," said Vrulnus. "Inside - - their negative duality, which they can project. . Was there ever such a curse in the universe?"

"Kill them!" shrieked a woman behind him, in instinctive revulsion. *"Kill them!"*

"Stand back!" cried Shahn. "They're coming out!"

He felt Lillian's nails dig involuntarily into his flesh as she saw what he was witnessing. Swirling shadows, like mists of night, rose up from the motionless chrysalides. They seemed to dance in a slow rhythm, like nameless monsters out of the unvisited pits of delirium. As the rhythm increased, the shadows deepened and coalesced into a menacing black cloud The cave began to lose its proportions.

"Hypnosis!" warned Vrulnus, speaking to Wade, Lillian and Shahn. "Stand close!"

As they did so, he activated the weapon in his artificial limb, and the blue screen of force surrounded them. Immediately, the insidious mental grip was released, and they saw the cave in its normal proportions.

Then Vrulnus raised the sarniall deliberately and fired. Its dark aura of energy penetrated the screen and went swirling out toward the angry cloud of blackness, wreaking havoc.

Suddenly, the Metamorph shadows were gone. In their place, at Vrulnus' feet beyond the screen, was a group of innocent young women, naked, beautiful. Some of them held little infants to their breasts. They held out their arms, or their babies, pleading for life.

"Stop!" cried a man's voice behind Vrulnus. "Don't kill them!"

The rest of the unshielded crowd, fully hypnotized, tried to push forward against the bluish shield of energy, but were repelled. Within the shield, Vrulnus and his companions saw the illusion only if they willed it. But they could also see within each angelic female form the hovering shadow of a Metamorph.

Remorselessly, Vrulnus fired the sarniall at them. Illusion dismembered the young women horribly and spilled apparent life's blood onto the ground.

"Kill them!" pleaded Lillian. *"Kill them!"*

The mighty weapon in Vrulnus' hands gradually wiped the illusion away and brought death to the last of the Metamorph extensions. There lay before them only the helpless, physical chrysalides, which nothing could destroy short of atomic fire. Lillian shuddered in revulsion when she knew she shared one thing in common with those hell-spawned monstrous crystals - - for they, too, in a sense, had lost their souls . .

12: *Concept Incredible*

SHAHN and Lillian looked out the visiport of the giant star ship, lost in thought. Astern, Earth's blue-green globe diminished almost visibly in diameter.

"There is so much that has gone unanswered," said Lillian, at last. "When will he tell us?"

"Soon," said Shahn. "We may not have seen the last of the enemy ships. He'll not come out of his shell until danger is past."

"Please don't use that word, Shahn!"

"Shell? Yes, I'm sorry. It has acquired a repulsive meaning."

"Shahn - - that bomb. It was horrible. Did he have to? I mean - - Hollywood, the beautiful hills - - all that property - - "

"He saw to it the populace was warned in time. What's property now, with what still faces terrestrial civilization? Those chrysalides - - their Main Base and the ships - - they *had* to go, Lillian."

"It's hard to adjust one's perspective to the reality of the situation. I'm glad,

though, be rescued all those people and set them down in a safe place. Do you think they will carry out his instructions?"

"I think so. That last episode in the crypt should have convinced them of what they're up against with other Metamorphs still loose in the world and able to increase their number through Nrlanian mutations." After a moment, he added. "At least I know your good pal, Wade Kennedy, will do his part. He'll lead the opposition if anyone will."

Lillian smiled wistfully. "Poor Wade! He was so loyal, so brave - - and loveable. I hope I shall live to see him again."

"You may."

"Oh Shahn - - will Vrulnus really go back someday to Earth, prepared to rescue it?"

"I'm sure he intends to."

"But how? Where is he going now?"

"I'm not too sure, but - - "

"But what? Tell me, Shahn!"

He smiled. "Let's wait and see. Incidentally, you're forgetting something important."

"What is that?" She looked at him wonderingly.

"How much we have to be thankful for."

She smiled, drawing close to him. "Have I forgotten that?"

His lips found hers, and sweet oblivion cast its cloak about them - - until he felt her tears against his face. He looked at her, frowning, and dark memory of the sarniall returned.

"If I could be whole again!" she sobbed. "Oh Shahn! - - Shahn! How can even Vrulnus return the eternal essence to my finite flesh?"

"There is much we have to ask of him," he answered. "It is why he is such a precious man - - a single human with the memory of a world's past greatness and the answers to our dream of life all locked up in his heart and mind. For example, you forget that as a Nrlanian I carry also the seed of mutation - - "

Realization came slowly, but Lillian's eyes finally widened in horrified comprehension. "You mean - - you, too, could become a - - "

He nodded darkly. "It was cowardly of me to mention it to you, yet - - the thought might have occurred to you when you were alone. I wanted to tell you this, dearest: Vrulnus has intimated that he has an answer to that problem, too. Can you understand why I was willing to barter a world for his salvation?"

* * * * * *

VRULNUS opened the subject, himself, hours later.

"We are safe," he told them, as he emerged from the control room. Somehow, a new zest for life and the glow of constructive energy had added youth to his face, almost obliterating the effect of the scars that had disfigured it. In his deep, gray eyes shone a purpose and confidence - - a great expectancy of fulfillment - - which was contagious. "Sit down. The time has come for explanations."

They sat on hiber bunks while the giant star ship hurtled with undiminished acceleration out of the solar system.

"This is my own ship," he began. "No one but myself knew its secrets. Rospor stole it from me and I have been helpless without it ever since. He, like the rest of you, Shahn, took several centuries to reach Earth, under suspended animation. Yet this was ironical, for had he known its secret he could have covered the same distance in ten years or less."

"But how is that possible?" protested Shahn. "The mass-energy coordinates curve to infinity at the speed of light. Even Terrestrials know that!"

Vrulnus waved his hand impatiently. "Never mind that now. It involves a new type of math relative to the acceleration of inertia - - which is a new concept. We'll get to it later. The important thing is, we have the ship. Your minds, I can see, are filled with questions, which

I will answer.

"Before landing on Earth in an ordinary star ship, I knew what to expect, because my ship was a relatively late arrival too, and I had listened to the tapes. I had already prepared my crew to form the nucleus of an underground organization of resistance to the Metamorphs. It was difficult, even then, to foresee the magnitude of our problem. Our people were scattered, fearful, disguised. I began secretly to organize, but then one night I examined an abandoned ship and was surprised by a force of the enemy I never saw."

He pointed again at the scars on his face. "I was incapacitated for years and even suffered from a partial amnesia. I recovered most of my memory, but still could not remember the most important thing of all - - which was the nuclear-static equation for the field converter of the sarniall. Without that, I could not build the weapon.

"I needed you, Shahn, but also I needed my ship. I knew that if it still existed Rospor would have it, and I knew Rospor would be connected with the center of Metamorph control. If I were to reveal my true identity prematurely I would meet with opposition before I was prepared for it. When you finally did arrive, I heard of your clever escape from the Metamorph trap at N-1 Base. I trailed you, hoping that you would attract high level Metamorph attention, and I prepared daily to follow you into their trap - - which I finally did.

"I, too, needed money for research - - hence my pretended 'discovery' of the radiation engine, which the U.S. Airforce now has. With the money, I developed the sub-energy field generator." He slapped his artificial limb. "This was the surprise I held in reserve for the Metamorphs against the time when you should build a sarniall. Well - - you know the rest of *that*. I left your sarniall with our resistance forces on Earth, knowing that they and your good friend, Wade Kennedy, would put it to good use - - perhaps find a way of duplicating and mass-producing it. But now we come to the important part of the discussion. . "

He paused, smiling at both of them.

It was the Earthman's strange and startling concept of duality which finally enabled me to solve the mystery of Ao. And therein lies the answer, I hope, to all our problems at the present moment."

Lillian's brows furrowed in puzzlement. "What - - is Ao?" she asked.

Shahn was too emotionally involved in these revelations for which he had hungered so long. He could not speak. Vrulnus studied his disciple as though preparing himself for a monumental task.

"It is something almost impossible to explain, because the semantics of the subject are so poorly developed in any living language," he said, at length. "But you shall see it."

"What!" exclaimed Shahn. "You mean - - "

Vrulnus nodded. "The real reason behind my urgent need for recovering this ship," he said. "We must return to Ao, and quickly, too. We destroyed Nrlan, but not its moons. I have reason to believe that ancient Gral still circles our double sun in some kind of orbit, however eccentric it may be . . "

Lillian shook her head, confused. "I'm lost," she said. "Utterly lost."

Shahn gripped her hand in his, bidding her be still. "All right. So we return - - and to Ao. *Then* what?"

"First - - a bit of theory and Nrlanian history," said Vrulnus. "Not all of our ancient history is known to Nrlanians - - except to most of us elders of the generation of Gral. We who walked beneath its dark disc pondered long over the mystery of Ao, and our dead great past. Once, the Nrlani were kings of the universe, but then - - tragedy fell upon them. Someone discovered the ether and performed an uncontrolled experiment."

He looked at Lillian. "On Earth, your scientists merely postulated the exist-

ence of an unknown substance, *ether,* to explain wave phenomena such as light and magnetics. On Nrlan, they actually identified this so-called ether as a finer matter co-existing in an interlocked balance with gross matter. Ever since your famous 'Manhattan Project' in Chicago, during which your first nuclear reactor was put to the test, your nuclear physicists have been vaguely aware of what I am driving at, but they have not yet developed the techniques for measuring this sub-matter effectively."

He took a big breath, then said, "It is the substance of which the *soul* is composed."

Lillian looked at Shahn, remembering the episode in the Church. He had said that if he had a soul he would photograph it. Now she knew what he meant.

"Then - - actually what you are saying is that the soul is a *physical* reality?" she queried. She also remembered Shahn's mysterious contention that there was nothing supernatural.

Vrulnus smiled faintly. "Among all races of men and in all times," he replied, "Man, in general, has been possessed of a miraculous inner eye - - a Third Eye, so to speak - - which has at least perceived the shape of truth when the mere electro-chemical orientation of conscious thought to environment remained inadequate to the task. The result of this inner sight has usually been manifested in the form of a religion, which is an organized social effort to interpret the unknown. I would not offend your faith, Lillian; and on the contrary I can support it. You see, almost all religions had one truth in common - - the awareness of co-existence between a gross matter and a finer matter, which phenomenon you refer to as duality.

"To answer your question, then. Has the soul a physical reality? In Terrestrials, yes - - and once, in the era of our greatness, it was so with Nrlanians. We, too, were once well balanced with our sub-material interlocked energy-mass fields. But then - - someone built the first sarniall - - which is an ether warp, but on a titanic scale.

"There must have been some sort of explosion of energy controlling the warp generator, because it not only rocked the planet by upsetting its sub-material balance, that is, in the finer interlocked matter called ether, but it simultaneously swept our inner essence out of the total flesh of the race."

Shahn gaped. "We lost - - our souls!"

Vrulnus winced. "There is a strange intellectual revulsion to that term, in English, since it has been so long associated with mysticism and philosophical alchemy. Let us, instead, use the ancient and little known Nrlanian equivalent, *karn,* which means the counterpart of gross material flesh in sub-material form - - the interlocked counter-balance of our carnate selves. So I may answer you: yes - - the total *karn* of the race was dislodged - - but not lost . . "

"*Not* lost!" Shahn's eyes shone with an insuppressible light of hope.

"Before we go into that," said Vrulnus, "I must explain to you this fact: That Nature always seeks a balance. Shorn of this balance between gross matter and sub-matter - - that is, between flesh and *karn* - - by processes incomprehensible to myself a natural method of regenerating the *karn* evolved, unknown to us. The result was a negative thing - - the mutation - - "

"Metamorphosis!"

"Yes - - our curse. And the antidote - - "

"Would be to replace the original *karn!*"

"Correct again. And now you see - - after witnessing the faith of Earthmen in their own duality - - I became encouraged to re-examine my hitherto bizarre hypothesis as to what had happened to us. I think that catastrophic ether warp of ancient times did not destroy our collective *karn.* I believe that it eddied outward on the periphery of that warp, and settled on Gral - - "

"*Ao!*" exclaimed Shahn.

"Concept incredible," said Vrulnus, "hut perhaps true. A single *karn*, representing our lost race and our lost greatness. An eternal thing, waiting to fill the void of our flesh and wash us clean of the curse of mutation."

Shahn leapt to his feet and paced the deck, his face bathed in perspiration. Now Lillian knew the magnitude of Vrulnus' mind. The concept was yet beyond her grasp.

"I cannot consciously understand quite all that you seek to convey," she told Vrulnus. "But on the fringe of the subconscious I feel what you mean. I almost wonder if we're sane."

Shahn turned about. "But even so," he said, swiftly, "what if it were true? What if Ao is the lost, total soul of the race. How do we - - "

"There was one difficulty that hothered me," said Vrulnus. "But now it seems that some force of predestination has thrown this lovely woman into a predicament analagous to yours, Shahn. The sarniall dislodged her *karn*. She is, as you are, unbalanced, and thus carries the seed of mutation - - "

Lillian opened her eyes wide. She tried not to scream. Shahn looked at her, astounded at the concept that she, too, might become a Metamorph.

"But that may all be avoided - - " Vrulnus started to say . .

IN THAT moment, they were all thrown to the floor as the star ship automatically swerved on its course.

"Meteors" shouted Vrulnus. "Lillian - - get into a bunk. Shabn! Strap her in! The course alternator is designed for *us*, not her!"

Lillian was aware of Shahn swaying over her in the shock of rapid course changes, while he strapped her down. Then oblivion settled upon her. She did not know that she slept for years, after that, because when the meteors passed Vrulnus put her into suspended animation for the great crossing over the star roads to the distant grave of Nrlan.

After Shahn had suhmitted to the treatment also, he was not aware of an occurrence which would have shattered, utterly, his awakening dream of life.

For as Vrulnus lay down on a hiberhunk preparatory to giving himself the needle that would place his life forces in prolonged suspension, he suddenly stopped, looking in amazement at his hands. His gray eyes widened slowly, then his powerful face contorted in fear and anguish.

"No!" he groaned aloud. *"No!"*.

But the evidence of his senses was incontrovertible.

Out there in the far reaches of interstellar space, in the confines of the hurtling star ship, while his precious companions slept in the helpless sleep of years, Vrulnus' mighty hands were slowly excreting a greenish slime - - which would increase and harden, all over his body.

It might take ten years, this mutation, hut in the end - - at the end of their vital journey to Ao - - he would be the virtual Khal of every Metamorph that had yet evolved.

And when the process was complete, he would be *hungry* . . But Shahn and Lillian were unaware of this. They slept blissfully at his side . . .

13: *Battle of the Khals*

BENEATH the shell of consciousness, dreams and memory combined in Shahn's struggling mind. After ten long years, he was stirring out of suspended animation . . . .

* * * * * *

Nrlan!

Graveless is Nrlan, world of the dead great past. It drifts a nebulous cold cloud of death and ashes down the shoreless sea - - emptiness where once were dreams and love and laughter - - and dark despair.

Beloved mate, wearer of my own scar of *san*, Sralna, she of the summer moons - -

But no!

He stood on a cliff overlooking a

strange sea on another world, watching the figure of a girl hurtle to her death - - so beautiful she had been, so young.

And then - - a pair of clear blue eyes, raven hair, a slim-waisted girl who washed dishes in a sink.

"No!" he muttered, groaning aloud.

Too late did he stagger to his feet to grapple with the bullet-torn man who held in his dying hands the glowing sarniall, its terrible forces concentrated upon the girl. Darkness, like a negative entity, swirled about Lillian Hammer, and she paled - -

Swirling shadows, like mists of night, rose up from the motionless chrysalides. They seemed to dance in a slow rhythm, like nameless monsters out of the unvisited pits of delirium.

Then Vrulnus raised the sarniall and fired. Young women, naked and beautiful, held out innocent babes - - but he fired remorselessly.

It was over now. Vrulnus had saved their dream of life. And Ao waited at the end of the journey . . .

* * * * * *

"Vrulnus!" he cried, sitting up suddenly and looking about him in the crypt-like ship.

Instead of Vrulnus, he saw on the hiberbunk beside him the beautiful, sleeping form of the Earth woman - - Lillian, barred from his life by obstacles insurmountable; bound to him eternally for the same reason. He loved her. She was the *karn* of his lonely flesh.

"Thank Ao!" he exclaimed. "She lives!"

And then - - then only did he turn to look for Vrulnus - - his mighty mentor and saviour of worlds - - most precious man . . .

With the mercurial swiftness of his kind, Shahn tensed so strenuously that the tendons and veins of his body sprang into ghastly relief upon his flesh, contorting his face. After a full minute of numbing shock, Shahn emitted a hoarse shriek of mortal anguish.

And Lillian awoke, to gaze upon what had once been Vrulnus, Khal of Nrlan . .

HOURS passed before Shahn finally yielded to the conviction that Lillian's mind was gone. The shock had been too great. He locked her in the observation dome, where she mumbled incoherently at the unfamiliar stars of these distant depths of the void.

Then he turned himself resolutely to the task of disposing of the grotesque chrysalide that had once been the greatest human alive - - grotesque, it was, because of its weird lack of symmetry. One leg was missing, and on the floor lay an artificial limb.

Heart-breaking as it was, in his tragic new loneliness, to dump the inhuman shell of what had once been his beloved teacher out of the airlock, he set himself to the task. He began to unloosen the half-parted straps of the swollen, glistening thing . . .

The ship darkened ominously . .

He paused, suddenly overtaken by an olden fear - - a recollection of the cloying death-grip of the Metamorph.

It lived! Its shell was here in his hands - - but its great negative *essence* surrounded him!

"Vrulnus!" he cried out at the condensing shadows, shivering in the strange, intolerable coldness that was of the mind rather than of the flesh. "Vrulnus - - this is Shahn! You can't!" He leapt to an opposite extremity of the deck and looked back.

On top of the chrysalide sat the opaque shadow of a man. As he had been powerful and incomparable among humans, now Vrulnus' antithesis was the undeniable dark *Khal* of Metamorphs - - the master evil force that was capable of extending the influence of his kind throughout the universe.

Had Shahn been of Earth, or an ordinary Nrlanian, he might have succumbed totally to his instinctive fear. But in him flowed the blood of the Khals. Slowly, he collected himself, and a fire of wrath lighted in his dark eyes.

"It cannot be!" he said.

"But it is!" said the shadow-man, in ghostly tones. "Just as your mind has told you, it is so. This is my ship, Shahn, and you are my pilot. I shall return now - - to Earth. And there - - "

"No," retorted Shahn. "No - - there must be another way . . Look! We are opposite poles. I am now the human Khal . . "

"And I the inhuman Khal. Our purposes are diametrically opposed, Shahn."

"Exactly. Therefore, we are two Khals - - met between two opposed camps - - to come to terms."

"*My* terms, Shahn . ."

"No - - *mutual* terms!"

"This presupposes that you have something to offer - - something to bargain *with*. And you have not."

Shahn's nostrils flared. "Only an interesting challenge, Vrulnus," he retorted, between his teeth.

"That presupposes again," said the shadow, "that we are atavisms subject to emotion. The appeal of a challenge lies in the glandular emotion of pride. We have none. No, Shahn - - offer me no battle of empires. My wants are quite simple. In fact - - I might offer you some recourse, in return for - - "

The shadowy figure seemed to be concentrating on the closed observation dome, where Lillian was imprisoned.

"Simply stated," said the man-shadow, "I am *hungry* . . "

Shahn felt his flesh quiver. A coldness in his bones dampened his temper. He paused, breathlessly, thinking fast. This was another one of those fateful hinges of decision whereon swung the gate of destiny. If he could not gain the upper hand on this thing now - -

"How am I to give that which you can take?" he asked, cautiously. "You'd better crawl into your shell and hibernate. It's a long journey back, Vrulnus. You will get hungry again, you know . . "

Already, the dark shadow had begun to attenuate, its now amorphous presence drifting toward the door of the observation chamber.

"And then you will want *me*," Shahn continued swiftly. "But I am your pilot. Without me, the ship cannot reach your goal."

He waited, tensing, until the shadowy mist had seeped under the door of the chamber where Lillian sat incarcerated. Then, in an almost invisible flash of motion, he pounced on Vrulnus' forgotten artificial limb. Couched within its upper framework was the shield generator, still powered by the permanent Nrlanian battery with which its inventor had supplied it.

Instantly, the living chrysalide warned its projection, and the shadow returned into the room as if blown by an etheric wind. It loomed, mantis-like, above him, but in that moment the shield sprang into lambent life, surrounding Shahn with its welcome canopy of energy.

The great shadow hovered over the bowl of energy, not touching it, but blocking out light. Only dimly could Shahn see the gleaming chrysalide at his side, by the light of the glowing tubes in the generator he held.

Vaguely, as from an infinite distance, a menacing thought crept into his mind: *I'll reach you, Shahn, eventually, through the gross molecular structure of the deck. Don't force me to destroy you. You will one day take my place, Shahn - - as the Khal of Metamorphs . .*

"No!" shouted Shahn. "Never!" He pulled at the chrysalide, crashing it to the deck. Placing the field generator on top of it, he pushed it toward the airlock.

That will avail you nothing, Shahn, came the distant, feeble thought of the projection beyond the shield. *You have yet to learn of my powers . . I warn you!*

Relentlessly, Shahn kept at his task. He opened the inner hatch and pushed the living black shell inside the lock. After snatching up the artificial limb that housed the generator, he drew back, closed the hatch, then depressed the stud controlling the outer hatch. And still the persistent shadow hovered over

him.

He ran to the control room, followed instantly by the evil darkness.

Fool! - - came the distant thought. *I am of the ether! I can distort your magnetics - - alter your course!*

"Try it!" shouted Shahn, as he lay the generator on the panel and raced his hands over the console. Meanwhile, he prayed to Ao for Lillian's salvation, as he jerked the star ship off course, dipped it viciously, and dumped the chrysalide out of the open lock. Then he accelerated.

The shadow of Vrulnus dissolved.

Shahn cut the force generator, thankful for the return of the lights. He rushed to the observation chamber, to find Lillian unconscious on the floor, bleeding from her nose and mouth. With a barely audible cry of anguish, he picked her up in his arms and took her to a hiberbunk, where he strapped her in. Her breasts rose and fell in fitful breathing.

The star ship swayed almost imperceptibly, then braked its headlong plunge through emptiness. He dashed back to the controls, not daring to believe the Metamorph could actually affect the propelling forces of the vessel.

Yet the instruments told him that some strange new phenomenon was impeding the star drive. He swore, pouring in more power, trying to shake off the cloying drag - - and at last he felt a clear, clean surge of flight, as though the ship, like a frightened lark, had eluded the talons of a hawk.

Suddenly, darkness rushed upon him, and the cold of the outer void paralyzed his limbs. In spite of the chrysalide's distance, its projection still reached him.

With mind-staggering power, Vrulnus' angered death-thoughts pierced his consciousness like a mighty scythe: *Pick me up, Shahn, or die!*

Shahn remembered - - he was his teacher's disciple, and the teacher was reaching at him over a terrible gulf of distance. He braced his mind, blocking in the shield he had been taught to build against alien penetration. Slowly, the chill abated, but the shadow yet clung to him, trying now to drain the electric elixir of life from his body. Nausea swept upon him. He sweated, blocked, fought - - and moved!

Slowly, in the midst of the grimmest struggle of his life, he turned to the panel, pushing in the acceleration stud, increasing the distance between shadow and shell by tens of thousands of miles.

Then - - like a bubble - - the shadow broke into a withering mist and was gone. Shahn sagged weakly until his knees crumpled under him. He sat on the floor, leaning against the panel cabinet, eyes staring into nothingness . . .

14: *Ao - - and the Dream of Life*

DAYS of deceleration followed. Shahn's instruments told him he was nearing the old system of Nrlan, and already the great double sun which had warmed his incubator, centuries past, had become visible to the unaided eye.

But great Nrlan was now only a vast, eccentric ring of asteroids - - and somewhere among those haunted fragments swung dark Gral, the moon of Ao, his mysterious goal. By terrestrial standards, Gral was a planet, he remembered, being some four thousand miles in diameter and possessing an atmosphere. For all he knew, it might even be inhabited by some unknown form of life.

As Lillian convalesced slowly from her physical impairment resulting from the ship's undue acceleration during the battle with Vrulnus, Shahn looked moodily ahead at the ever expanding Nrlanian system - - and wondered just what he was supposed to do when he arrived on the moon of Ao. The final mystery of the ages was to have been revealed to him by his great teacher. Vrulnus knew the final answer, but now he was gone forever. It devolved upon him alone to solve the enigma.

Whenever he would stand over Lillian where she lay on the hiberbunk, he would ponder on one of Vrulnus' last, cryptic statements: "There was one difficulty that bothered me; but now it seems that some force of predestination has thrown this lovely woman into a predicament analagous to yours, Shahn."

What did it mean? The analagous predicament referred to their emptiness, to the absence of their *karns*. Why should the fact that she, too, was thus afflicted solve a difficulty with relation to Ao?

He did not know . .

* * * * * *

GRAL'S dark side lay beneath the star ship. The ghostly halo of atmosphere floated like an ethereal skrim above shadowed ravines and mountains touched with starlight. Deep within one far distant gorge, in the midst of abyssmal night, gleamed a bright, shimmering light, like a shackled god of a lost dawn - - imprisoned, gigantic, chained, waiting through eternity to be unleashed.

As Shahn looked upon this flaming aura of light energy in his telescope - - like some vast nebula of creative world fire lost in the void - - he was afflicted with a form of ague. He trembled with the presentiment of Ao's *living presence*. It offended his Khal's blood to fear - - yet he feared this awesome, waiting entity.

Lillian stood beside him, afflicted with partial amnesia. She only remembered him, but of Vrulnus or Ao she recalled nothing. Nor was she aware that she had ever been the victim of a sarniall.

"What is it?" she asked him, innocently.

He took hold of her hand and searched her eyes. "I don't know," he told her. "But we must go there."

"Why, Shahn? Is that home?"

"Perhaps - - or maybe not a location, exactly. It is more related to time, dear."

"Time? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps - - it is Tomorrow . . . There was once - - a dream of life - - a dream that a great teacher of mine once described to me alone. This may be the secret of that dream. Shall we go?"

Childlike, Lillian clapped her hands together. "Oh, let's go see what it is!"

Shahn led her out of the observation chamber and into the control room. The girl wondered at his hand in hers, for it seemed to tremble . .

THEY wore heated suits and air helmets against the cold of Gral. He led her carefully over the dark, virgin terrain of the satellite, up the high-walled gorge toward the soaring aurora that loomed above Ao's abode.

In Shahn's eyes grew a light of wonder, of uncomprehended hope. In his blood tingled an unvoiced message. His face was alight with the growing illumination of the entity awaiting him.

As he walked thus, Lillian caught his mood and responded equally to the ecstatic experience of revelation. She needed no guidance now. Her footsteps quickened over the volcanic ground, and at last it was she who guided him.

In the midst of ecstasy, awe and wonder engendered Shahn's previous unknown fear. Instinctively, he slowed his pace, yearning to go on into that world of light, yet dreading the shock of virtual resurrection. For was not his empty human shell to be filled with the eternal essence? What would it be like to bear within him the conglomerate *soul of a race?*

He would no longer be himself!

"No! Lillian - - stop!" he cried, halting.

But the girl would not be stayed. She left him standing there. Entranced, she continued onward.

And then, at last, he knew the meaning of Vrulnus' cryptic remarks about her. The difficulty with Ao was that, as the macro-*karn* of the ancient master race of Nrlan, it possessed both male and female components. Or could this difference in gender be applied to such as Ao? If so, then a physical male *plus* a female was necessary for the impending mystical phenomenon. He, therefore,

was also a vital necessity for Ao's long-awaited dual incarnation.

"Wait!" he cried.

But before he could proceed, the magnificent aurora darkened in his eyes, and he felt the chill hand of death upon him.

So near, Shahn, came a dark thought into his mind, *and yet so far!*

"Vrulnus!" he yelled, already struggling to block his mind against the enveloping darkness of the Metamorph. "How did you - - "

How did my chrysalide become a satellite of Gral? My secret, Shahn, which you will never know.

"But let me go on! I must join her!"

No. She may embrace the Essence, but to no avail, for she will be stranded. You are my pilot, Shahn. We are returning to Earth. Submit, or die!

"And you with me!" he shouted, his body bathed in sweat from his mental exertions.

The darkness and the coldness waned momentarily as he blocked his mind fiercely and struggled forward, up the gorge. Then he stumbled and fell as the darkness returned. His senses reeled.

* * * * * *

HOW long he lay there he could not know. When he opened his eyes it was to witness a sight beyond human experience.

Between himself and the light of Ao, now strangely diminished to half its former intensity, he saw the hovering shadow. It densified angrily and rushed up the gorge toward a human figure that advanced to meet it.

"Lillian!" he cried out in alarm, rising to his feet. And then he paused, incapacitated.

In the comparative darkness of the gorge at this point, her form was limned with a mysterious light. Her beautiful face seemed virtually to glow. She moved confidently to meet the Metamorph!

Vrulnus swooped down upon her, trying to envelope her in darkness. But that was the dark Khal's last move. Suddenly, the darkness fell away like tempest-scattered dust, and was no more.

Beaming upon him, Lillian now approached and reached out her hand to Shahn.

"Vrulnus," came her vital, ringing voice through the phones, "is but a living shell without a karn. Helpless, untenanted by his negative essence, he will swing through the lonely courses of the void forever. Come, Shahn. Here is your dream of life."

And she led him into the waiting aura, where light alone was vision, and titanic life flooded him with sight and sense unmeasured . . .

SHAHN and Lillian stood together before the star ship, looking back on the darkened gorge. Gone was Ao, for it had been reborn. In them resided the macro-*karn* of the ancient race.

"We *are* no more," said Shahn.

She smiled. "Not as we were - - "

"Our like is unparalleled in existence."

"This is spiritual mutation."

"Perhaps it is symbolic of Man's next change."

"Earth awaits our return, Shahn."

"No. First, the great dream must be born. When that is accomplished - - then we may return to rescue Earth . . "

The shining woman smiled upon him. "What *is* your great dream of life, Shahn?"

The shining man took her hand in his, turning toward the ship.

"Come," he said. "We will build it . . "

THE END

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40,000 Absolutely Staggering Words!

WHERE THE HIGH GODS GO

By Robert Moore Williams

Once more a famous author tackles a subject lesser writers decline to handle—and once more a very unusual story results . . .

IN THE FAR depths of space, where the bright suns are scattered across the light years like vast flaming jewels, the battle raged. Elinel was hard-pressed. He had been bard-pressed ever since be bad been discovered near a planet of one of the dark suns ruled by the Glom. This was forbidden territory for him. He had gone there against the advice of his elders who had grown wise in the ways of the Glom, simply because he was curious.

He had not been perturbed when he had been detected by tbe Glom destroyer but he had withdrawn at a leisurely pace. Then the light but terrifically fast Glom cruiser bad come upon him out of nowhere.

He was bigger than the cruiser, he could probably out-fight it, he could certainly out-maneuver and out-run it. As the cruiser came toward him he began to mobilize the really terrific energies present in his structure. He was a creature of radiation, a light heing, and he used light and its associated frequencies as his energy source. As the cruiser came toward him, he was momentarily startled, and mobilized energy. Then he thought that he would have fun with this Glom fighting craft, luring it out into the far depths of space, playing games with it, finally leaving the discomfited Glom commander wondering what had happened as be vanished in a burst of speed. There was no animosity in Elinel's actions, he knew that the Glom were dangerous because his elders had told him so. But he was young, and here was a chance to bave fun.

He dodged the cruiser, let it drive past him. The destroyer caught him. A light heam flared.

Sudden agony surged through Elinel. Until this moment, he had not known what agony meant. He knew its meaning

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now. The agony told him that his curiosity would probably end in his dissolution. It would end in as near death as the Glom could contrive for any of the wave-energy creatures like Elinel.

He twisted and rolled away, trying to build up speed and to repair the damage at the same time.

But the cruiser had turned too. Its beam caught him.

Again the agony seared through him, almost paralyzing him. He rolled away and tried desperately to pick up speed. Somewhere near him was a sun with circling planets. He accelerated toward this system. Even with the agony slowing him, he could still move faster than light.

So could the Glom cruiser and destroyer. They followed him like wolves desperately intent on their kill. The beams from their light weapons seared through him. He blundered blindly through space. The sun loomed in front of him. Even he would be destroyed in the flaming inferno of a major sun. He detected this one just in time to veer around it. He saw the planets again. The planet nearest the sun was already behind him. He moved toward the second planet. Again the Glom weapons caught him, searing through him. Their impact was great enough to cause him to miss the veiled world floating there.

He swung toward the third planet, hoping to get it between him and the pursuing ships. The beams from both cruiser and destroyer caught him simultaneously.

The effect was cataclysmic.

On the visascreen of the Glom cruiser, the cataclysmic effect was clearly visible. Awed, but with a feeling of triumph coming up in him, the Glom commander stared at what the screen revealed.

"He exploded into star dust!" he said to the cruiser captain with him.

The screen revealed what had happened. Where the vast bulk of the wave-energy creature had been was now nothing but a vast glitter of tiny points of corus-cating lights drifting like gently falling snow toward the planet below.

"We actually destroyed one of those creatures!" the captain answered. Exultation was in his voice. He saw himself receiving the order of merit for valor in battle and promotion to the grade of commander. The feeling grew stronger as he watched the tiny glittering lights descending toward the surface of the planet.

The commander was more experienced. This was the first time he had personally witnessed such a sight but he was familiar with the reports of other Glom commanders who had encountered one of the wave-energy creatures.

"May I remind you that what we have seen here is not necessarily destruction for one of these creatures?" the commander said. "What we have just seen is the disintegrating of one of these wave-energy creatures into its component units. In other words, it has been reduced to the lowest common denominator."

"Yes, sir," the captain said, without interest. He was a fighting man and he had little understanding of such matters. To him, the enemy was destroyed. That was enough.

"If any two of those glittering points of light succeed in coming together again, they will be able to bring the entire creature back to life," the commander continued.

"Does that mean we have to go down and hunt out and destroy every one of those pin points of light?" the captain asked. He was appalled. There were millions of them. "That would take forever."

"It will take so long we won't even attempt it," the commander said. "Shift the screen to the planet."

The captain obeyed. The commander studied the screen carefully. "Um. I see. Very primitive. Warm, much water, about stage two in the evolutionary process. This means that none or very few life forms present on this planet will be

suitable for the wave-energy creature to manipulate as it tries to re-establish itself. This is very good. It makes our task so mucb simpler."

"How so, sir," the captain asked.

"Without life-forms already in existence, this creature will have to create them. No one of its units will be able to do much by itself but will be forced to seek a host to manipulate. If there is no adequate host, then it will have to be created. In order to develop the life-forms to their proper complexity to be adequate for its purposes, the creature may have to spend millions of years. And even then, the task may be impossible." The commander began to show signs of pleasure. Perhaps, after all, it would be possible to destroy one of the wave-energy creatures. "You did a splendid job of bandling your ship and your weapons, captain."

"Thank you, sir." The captain was very pleased. He saw himself being awarded the double order of merit and being advanced two grades.

"Of course, we must take every possible precaution to make it impossible for any of these sparkles of light to get together," the commander continued. "Their energy will be so depleted for a time that probably no effort will be made in that direction. But eventually the attempt will be made. There is where our precaution will come into play."

"Such as, sir?" the captain asked.

The commander mused. "There are various steps that we might take. The individual light sparkles are indestructible so far as we know. But the life-forms that these individuals will attempt to create, we can do something about them." The commander grinned to himself. "We will set up a frequency on the x radiation band and locate the generator in such a place that it cannot be found. This frequency will disrupt the matter forms if they touch the areas of knowledge that they will have to enter in order to re-combine. Yes, yes, this will work very well."

The commander was well pleased with himself. He understood bow to set up the fundamental disrupting frequency and what its impact would be. One small matter remained unsolved. He frowned, then smiled as he found a solution to this problem too.

"We will book the x frequency into their gravity field," he said. "Thus the planet's own gravity field will carry our disrupting frequency. There will be no way to escape it as long as the individual units of the wave-energy creature are forced to remain on the planet. Since they cannot escape from the planet without building suitable life-forms, tbey will probably be forced to remain here forever." Real satisfaction came up in bim as he spoke.

It would be a long time before this wave-energy creature reconstituted itself, if ever.

The cruiser stood by while the destroyer went in close and did what was needed to set up and to hide tbe generator of the x frequency. This done, the two Glom ships slid away into space.

Treading like heavy footed dinosaurs pushing their ponderous bulks through rain swamps deep with muck, millenia went dragging by.

Yellow against the black night, guns talked in the distance. Jed Fennel saw the flashes but they were too far away for the sound to carry to him. But the enemy was there, with a raiding party. Grimness made more grim by many failures came up in him. A small battle was being fought out there, but the outcome did not matter. Unless some genius came up with a desperate last-ditch solution, with some new weapon, this was the last rampart in a war that was long since lost. Jed and the others still fighting here did not continue fighting because they expected any longer to win, but because it was in their nature to figbt on until the last barricade bad gone down - - -and to go down with it.

"God made some of us stubborn," Jed thought. And wondered wby. He didn't

know why some men were stubborn but the ones who fought on here in this last citadel were stubborn men, all of them. They had another characteristic too, whether they were the scientists holed up inside the mountain behind him or men in the front line - - - they were fighting men. The process of survival had long since weeded out the malcontents, the misfits, the lame, the halt, and the blind. No, not all of the blind. It hadn't weeded out Gro Kelgar and Kelgar was almost blind. Only the spirit inside the wizened little scientist was not blind. In the last break-through of the enemy, Kelgar had left his work here in this mountain refuge and had come out to fight with the troops retreating inward. Jed had been present when Kelgar had reported to the general, for assignment to duty. He was not likely to forget that scene.

The general had been minded to raise hell with Kelgar for relieving himself of his post of duty to fight with the troops, claiming rightly that if any real hope of winning a stalemate yet remained, it rested in the hands of this almost blind scientist. After looking twice at Kelgar, the general had not raised hell but had very gently but firmly ordered the scientist back to his post of duty, in charge of the laboratories here.

Stubborn men - - - and fighting men. You could almost say that God, or the process of survival, had brought them together. Certainly these forces had brought together here not only the stubborn, fighting men but also the best brains that remained in what was left of America.

For once, the prophets of doom had been right. The onslaught from the Federation in Europe had come out of nowhere, in a rain of atom bombs exploding from the sky. The first vicious blow had hideously crippled and had laid waste the vital industrial and manufacturing centers. The direct attack, via paratroopers, had followed within hours. Every battle after the first blow had actually been a rearguard action, with the country split against itself, an effort to slow the victorious advance while the forces of defense were being rallied.

The war had worked itself through to the point where most of the country was ruled by a pseudo-government set up by the conqueror and subject to his will, while what remained of the armies retreated to this Rocky Mountain citadel, to make a last desperate stand in the hope that somehow, in the last moment, victory might be snatched from defeat.

If it was to be done at all, it must come out of the brains of such men as Gro Kelgar, Colonel Jed Fennel thought, watching the far distant guns flash yellow against the black night sky.

Jed had already been a fighter pilot when the war started, and very proud of his gleaming wings. In the four years that had passed since then, he had been advanced to Colonel. Promotions came fast in the air forces because the men who held the higher grades died quickly. Then there weren't many planes to fly and the men who still fought on transferred to the ground forces - - -

And you ended up here, in charge of a command and observation post squatted against the side of a mountain that had been made into the last citadel, sitting in darkness watching the guns spurt flame near the end of the long valley miles away, wondering how it was all going to end, and thinking of - - - Mary of Wichita.

He had no other name for the girl with the brown hair. He had known her only a week, as the armies moved westward past the city of Wichita, then they had lost each other.

At the thought of her, he stopped watching the flashes of the guns and noticed the strong emotions coming up inside of him. He could not label the emotions, they seemed mired. There was an emotion which he called the hush of dawn in the deep forest when all the world is waiting on tip-toe for the coming of the new day. Then there was another

which had to do with a tired man going home after the day's work was over, home to rest, to affinity, and to love. These two emotions were mixed in him so that he seemed to be waiting eagerly for the dawn and at the same time to be going home after the day's work was done, home to love. He did not understand these emotions but he knew he had them and he knew that he had been very lucky to have met Mary of Wichita and to have known her for one whole week.

She had done something for him. She had given him strength - - - and something else. He wondered what this something else had been and decided he did not know, or did not want to let himself know. But the picture of her seemed to be engraved on the very core of his being, on some deep inner self where he dwelt apart.

What had happened to her? Hastily he shut off such thinking. And - - - two pairs of footsteps sounded on the rough path that led from the command and observation post to the tunnel that led into the heart of the mountain. He wondered who was coming. Lieutenant Harker would not be coming to relieve him early, that was certain. Then the voice of the sentry from the tunnel mouth, called softly, giving the proper password. "Come on in," Jed said, opening the door.

A man out there thanked the sentry and entered. Then Jed knew who it was. Gro Kelgar. The almost blind scientist often walked out here at night.

"Good evening, Colonel?" Kelgar's voice was almost as soft as that of a woman.

"How are you, sir?" Jed was very polite. Kelgar was not only an idol to him but this scientist happened to hold the rank of major general.

"Very fine, Colonel. I - - -" He broke off. Off in the night, down the slope of the mountain, a sentry challenged sharply. Then the sentry's rifle spurted fire.

"Excuse me, sir." Jed turned swiftly. His fingers found switches and snapped them. An aerial on top of the post flooded the night with its radiations, probing through the darkness. The screen in front of Jed revealed the cedar-dotted talus slope below.

Dodging blindly and desperately through the stunted cedars, a man was fleeing down the slope.

The sentry fired again. His aim was blind, he did not have the advantages of this observation post. The slug knocked chips from a rock twenty feet away from the fleeing man.

"A spy!" Jed thought, anger coming up in them. Spies and informers had harassed them from the Atlantic to the Rockies. The enemy had been sowing them in the land for years, like bombs with delayed action fuses. When the first attack had been launched, many of the time bombs had gone off, producing threats in the rear. Others had exploded later.

Jed pressed the button sounded the alarm bell in the quarters hidden inside the cliff, summoning the guard. He hated to awaken tired, sleeping men but it had to be done. The sentry's rifle cracked again.

On the screen, Jed saw the man slip and fall, get to his feet and try to run, and fall again as a leg turned under him. The spy screamed, a sound of pure terror that seemed to rock the night with the essence of pain contained in it.

Jed closed his eyes for a moment. He had seen so many men trying to crawl on a broken leg away from death that he should have been inured to the sight but somehow he never quite achieved indifference to it. Somehow he always managed to feel as his own a little of the wounded man's pain and terror.

Led by Lieutenant Harker, the guard came running along the path.

"There's a spy down there, wounded. Bring him in here alive, for questioning."

They laid the fellow on the floor, in the darkness, for his examination. He

turned on the lights in the command post.

"He isn't armed, sir," the lieutenant said. "No gun on him." This fact seemed to nettle the lieutenant, though not much. Spies were always thinking up new ways to try to get into this final citadel. Coming here unarmed was only another dodge. It wouldn't get this one anywhere.

The man was young, but thin and gaunt, his unshaven cheeks hollow. He sat up as the lights came on and stared wildly around him. A wave of pain crossed his face and he set his lips against the pain that went along with it. His leg was twisted at an angle. Probably they would make no effort to bandage his leg or to ease his pain. Why waste precious bandages or further exhaust the dwindling supply of drugs when they could use the one real antidote for pain instead?

"I'm not - - - it's not what you think!" His face twisted and contorted as he tried to speak. "I - - - I'm not a spy!"

"That's what they all say," Harker said.

"But you're making a mistake."

"They all say that too," Harker continued.

"But I've got a message," the man protested. "No, that's not quite it either. I know something that is vitally important." The man was begging them to listen to him.

Behind him Jed was aware that Gro Kelgar had moved, for the first time, leaning forward and staring with dim eyes at the man on the floor. The spy had not seen Kelgar yet.

"If you've got something important to say, spill it," Harker said.

The man tried. "It's like this. No, I mean, it's not quite like this, either." Watching, Jed saw lights shift and change in the man's eyes. Confusion, perplexity, and doubt showed there. He seemed to be searching in his mind for the words he wanted to say, and yet not knowing quite what he had to say or the words to use to say it. Or maybe he knew what it was but the saying of it eluded him. Jed waited patiently. He was in charge here and would have to give the orders disposing of this man.

"It's like this." Suddenly the man knew what he wanted to say. The knowing showed in his eyes as a bursting glow of - - - something. "It's like this." He started to speak. Then, as if something came from somewhere and threatened to engulf him, he hastily changed his mind about what he wanted to say. "No. No! I can't tell you here. I - - - I can't tell you at all. If I tell you - - -" Panic came up in the man, a roaring flood of it. Watching, Jed thought that the panic was much greater than could have come from the pain of the broken leg, or even the fear of death.

Harker was unimpressed. And utterly indifferent. "It's up to you."

"No! I mean - - - Look, you've got to listen to me!"

"I'm listening," Harker said. The lieutenant's rest had been interrupted. He was mad about that. Like everyone else here, he was in a state of chronic anger.

"Let me talk to Gro Kelgar," the man begged. "Kelgar will understand."

Jed half turned, knowing that Kelgar stood behind him. Kelgar did not notice him and he did not seem to have heard what the spy was saying. The scientist had his eyes closed. He seemed to be listening. Jed wondered what the almost blind scientist was hearing. A little flicker of cold came up in him at the thought.

The lieutenant was unmoved by the request to talk to Gro Kelgar. "Why don't you ask to have your case personally reviewed by General Thompson, just like this was peace time, just like we hold formal trial for every rat we catch, and forward the minutes up through channels to be personally reviewed by the commander-in-chief?" Harker's voice dripped with sarcasm.

The man read his fate in the lieutenant's tone of voice. His gaze went wild-

ly around the room, seeking someone with whom he could communicate. Jed had the impression that the man was not asking for remission of the sentence that had just been passed on him. He had accepted the fact that he was going to be shot, no matter what happened. This did not matter. Wbat he had to communicate did matter. In comparison to the secret he had locked within him, nothing else was of any importance, even being shot. He found the colonel's eyes.

Jed blinked, startled. A blast of pure communication came at him from the man's eyes. For a split second, Jed knew what the man was trying to communicate, knew also that it was utterly important, maybe the most important fact in the history of the race, but before he could catch it with his conscious mind, something inside of him closed down over it, shutting it off from his view and from his memory. A split second after the spy had communicated to him, he could not remember the content of the message.

He was glad he could not remember it.

Death was in the message.

The lieutenant yawned. "Shall I shoot him, Colonel?"

Jed hesitated, trying to make up his mind. If he could only recall what he had known during that split second when he and tbe spy had been in communication, his decision would go one way. If he could not remember, his decision would go the other way. But which way? He did not know.

"What the hell?" the lieutenant growled. "It's only one more spy." He drew the pistol from its holster at his hip, slipped off the safety.

Behind Jed, Gro Kelgar spoke. "I would like to have this man, colonel."

"Of course, sir," Jed said.

"And you too," Kelgar continued.

"Eh? What? I mean, I'd be delighted sir. But I don't understand why."

"I don't understand, either," Kelgar answered. "The only reason I can give is that you and this man understood each other, for a micro-second. Somehow, in view of other facts that I have, this makes both of you important - - -"

"But - - - I am assigned here, sir."

"I have sufficient authority to relieve you of your post here and to assign you to my command. I will advise headquarters of my action through channels immediately. Meanwhile, have this man taken to my laboratory inside the mountain. You come along too, colonel."

"Yes, sir."

"Take a spy inside the mountain?" Harker protested. "Orders are that all spies are to be shot."

"You can shoot him in a few days, after I have finished with him," Kelgar answered. "What's your name, son?" As he spoke to the man on the floor, his voice became tender and soft.

"Ed Carter, sir. And - - - and thank you, sir - - - I did not see you until you spoke."

"Did you know me?"

"I saw a picture of you when I was small. I've carried that picture in my heart ever since. Thank you, sir. I do have something to say, but I cannot say it now or here." The look on Carter's face was pure gratitude.

"Lieutenant, take over my position here," Jed said to Harker.

"What the hell, sir? I mean, damnit, I'm off duty."

"You *were* off duty, lieutenant," Jed said. "Send for a stretcher. I want four of your men detailed to carry this man into the mountain."

"All right," Harker grumbled. In that moment his chronic anger was up to the point where he hated all officers. But discipline was deep within him, and he obeyed.

Jed and Gro Kelger followed the men who carried the stretcher. They went along a rough path to a hidden door that opened into a tunnel. Inside was a barracks, with men sleeping. They were a part of tbe forces that guarded this last citadel.

In the old days, men had dug a fantastic series of tunnels into this moun-

tain, digging gold. After they had dug the gold from the ground here, they buried it with great care in the ground somewhere else, playing some kind of weird game that Jed no longer understood. The mining had stopped here when the gold had played out. Before the start of the war, it had been reopened and tremendously enlarged, so that it was now both a fortress and a huge laboratory. As men had once dug day and night here for gold, they now worked day and night here, searching for new weapons, a new gas bomb, a disintegrative beam, for any weapon that promised even a hope of success. They had even attempted to harness the system of standing electrical waves that ring Earth's crust, to set up node points of destruction at each standing wave point. This attempt had failed. Without securing exact resonance, the amount of power required was greater than could have been supplied by all the atomic generating plants on the planet.

Any idea that desperate men could dredge up to win a losing war would be tried here.

They stopped at a first-aid station to bandage Carter's leg. The man set his teeth at the pain but waved away the bypodermic. "That will stop the pain but it will also stop me from talking. It is more important that I talk."

Kelgar nodded and seemed to understand. "Up in my lab we will talk," he said.

They carried the man upward through a maze of connecting tunnels. This place was atom bomb-proof, it was radio-active dust proof when the doors were sealed, its water supply was provided from wells sunk deep into the rock strata beneath. Food was stored here, in vast quantities. Barracks for troops were here.

This place was a bastion, a final fortress. Storming it would invite massacre. The enemy would not attempt to storm it, the high command reasoned. Instead the enemy would invest it and sit down outside and wait for its supplies to be exhausted and for disease and heartbreak to take their toll of the defenders. Why storm this fortress when it would drop into your hands like a ripe plum if you waited?

This was the reasoning of the high command as to the way the enemy would reason. It seemed accurate. For the past two months no real effort had been made to take this place. Instead there had been demands for surrender and the pseudo-government that had been set up by the enemy to govern what had once been called America was loudly calling the men who fought on here "Traitors!"

In this place, it was becoming an honor to be a traitor to a rump government.

Meanwhile, in this place, some scientist in this vast laboratory might discover a truly new secret weapon. In the fantastic world of science, anything could happen. For the sake of this desperate hope, desperate men continued to fight a desperate battle.

Gro Kelgar's private laboratory was a small place, homey, with the smell of pipe tobacco in the air and with no impressive equipment on display. A table of atomic weights was on the wall, the big desk was covered with weird models and with huge sheets of yellow paper on which were scrawled equations. Setting the stretcher on the floor, the men went outside. Gro Kelgar's big hand moved across the desk to a bank of push buttons there. He found one button and pushed it. Finding a second button, he pushed it too. Jed sensed that recording equipment was turned on when Kelgar pushed the first button. In response to the second button, a door at the end of the lab opened and a young man with tousled hair came groping into the room. He reached back around the door and found a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. Apparently he had been sleeping there.

"Will you bring your equipment please, Michael?"

The eyes behind the glasses found the wounded man on the stretcher. The eyes widened. "Another one, sir?"

"Yes."

The eyes widened again, to pop-eyed intensity. "Oh, golly." Michael ducked from the room. He returned with an air gun that Jed recognized as being used for blowing a medication, including sedation or even poison, through a person's skin. Michael took up his position squatting on the floor directly behind the wounded man.

Carter turned his head and glanced at Michael. His eyes came back to Kelgar.

"Okay, son. What is it that you have on your mind?" Kelgar said. His manner was easy, his voice was kind and pleasant.

"Gee, it's good to hear someone call me *son*." Carter whispered. Peace came over his face for a moment. Then the pain from his leg came back and the peace went away.

"What did you want to tell me?" Kelgar continued. Watching, Jed saw that Kelgar, in spite of his calm voice and his kindly manner, was cat-tense. Behind the spy, the eyes of Michael were almost bulging from his head.

"Both scared as the devil!" Jed thought. "They know more about this than they have told me." Inside of him, a feeling of tension came up similar to the feeling he had had in the past when he had dived his jet at a formation of enemy planes.

"It's like this." Carter was suddenly talking eagerly and rapidly. "I know who I am. I also know who you are. I - - -"

He stopped talking as quickly as he had begun. A vein throbbed on his forehead. His throat rasped. His eyes suddenly turned upward in their sockets.

"Quick, Michael," Kelgro shot out the words.

His aide pulled the trigger of the air gun. The instrument coughed softly. The charge of medication, of whatever it was, went into the man's shoulder. Kelgro dropped to his knees.

"What was it you wanted to tell me, son?"

"I - - - I - - -" The words were whispered. A convulsion was beginning in the man. It came up in a surge of muscles, poured out as a scream as Carter twisted and turned, then was gone as the man sighed and relaxed every muscle in his body. Kelgro bent over him very closely. The man sighed again, his breathing became regular and even.

"Did - - - did I get to him in time?" Michael whispered.

"I don't know, yet," Kelgro answered. "It looks as if you did but it's hard to tell. He's alive, that's certain. We'll take him to the hospital. Colonel, if you will call the stretcher bearers and come with me."

"Of course, sir." Mystified and confused, Jed followed the scientist and the stretcher bearers. The nurse in charge looked at Gro Kelgar. "Another one for the spin hin?" she said coldly.

"We don't know yet. But I want this man placed in a separate room and I want a nurse on duty day and night. The instant he awakens, I wish to be informed."

"Yes, General Kelgro." The face of the nurse plainly said that she wished Kelgro would take this patient and dump him off the top of the mountain. But she had been well-trained. She took her orders. Kelgro turned to Jed.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about?"

"Well, frankly, sir, I'm a little bewildered."

"Come with me and I will make you even more bewildered."

The man that Kelgro took Jed to see was in a single room. He was in a straight jacket which was strapped to the bed which he occupied. He was conscious. Straining and twisting at his bonds, he seemed to be trying to escape from invisible terrors. His face was both young - - - and old. He looked as if he had aged tremendously in a short time.

"I don't understand," Jed said.

"The man there was one of my most trusted aides," Kelgro said. "A brilliant youngster, one that deserved the title of genius. Also very well balanced emotionally. I was really expecting him to

crack the last big secret of the time-matter configuration." Kelgro shook his head and his voice went into silence.

"What happened?" Jed prompted.

"He discovered something. What it was, I do not know. He came running to me, yelling, 'I've got it, Gro. I've got it!' "

Excitement came up in Jed, then went down as the scientist continued. "Before he could tell me what he had discovered, this had happened to him. It happened right in front of me. I watched him go crazy, and found myself powerless to prevent it." Pain on his face, Gro Kelgar shook his head. "He was the first one. The second one was a man in the physics section. He also made some discovery which he thought was very important. He tried to communicate it to his immediate superior." Again the scientist's voice went into silence.

"What happened?" Jed prompted.

"The second man died. The autopsy disclosed cerebral hemorrhage." Kelgro hesitated and seemed to feel for the words he wanted to use. "Here we have two men who have made a discovery. What did these two men discover?"

"Perhaps totally different things."

"Yes. I have considered that. And that may be the answer. But why did one of them become insane and the second one die?"

"Coincidence," Jed suggested, and hesitated over his use of the word.

"I am an old man," Kelgro said. "Once, when I was young, I believed in coincidence. I hardly believe in it any longer. Law operates in this universe and what we used to call coincidence only means that some unknown law, or factor, is in operation. Well, enough of this. I have two assignments for you. The first is that you are to familiarize yourself with the laboratories here and their operation, to meet the men working in them. The second and more important is that as soon as this man Carter regains consciousness, you are to spend as much as possible of your time with him, to make friends with him, if you can, and to find out what it is that he is trying to communicate."

"I understand, sir," Jed said. He was both greatly excited and awed. Perhaps he was more scared than awed. In the chance to be in the laboratories, he found gladness. It seemed to him that Kelgro had reached back into his childhood and had found a bright dream hidden there. He had dreamed of being a scientist. Fate in the form of war had stopped his bright dreaming. How he had hated the enemy for that!

In the days that followed, he completely forgot the enemy, and the enemy's guns. The laboratories inside this final citadel were at one and the same time a madhouse, the gathering place of brilliant genius, and a fairyland of delight where men worked with stubborn metal and exploding force trying to create a new weapon. In these laboratories you only knew the enemy existed by watching the frantic efforts of desperate men seeking a way to stop him. To Jed, in a kind of a way, this place was heaven. His heart had never been in being a fighter, in killing other men. He had done his duty as a fighter, knowing the stakes, but he had looked forward to the time when he might forget all of this and become what he had always wanted to be.

At this point in his thinking Mary of Wichita came back into his mind. Hastily he diverted his attention.

Gro Kelgar was everywhere, directing, discussing, feeling models with his long deft fingers, squinting at them from weak eyes. The people here loved him.

Jed saw evidence of many ideas having been tested here in the past. The equipment in one small room interested him particularly. He inquired about it. "Yes, we once did a lot of work on anti-gravity," Gro Kelgar explained to him. "We even went so far as to develop a working model which stopped about ninety-seven per cent of the effect of the gravity of Earth. If we had peace, and

the time to develop it, anti-gravity would have enormous value. But we don't have peace and we were never able to find a way to use anti-gravity as a weapon. How about Carter?"

"They're bringing him back slowly," Jed said. "I drop in two or three times every day. He is beginning to accept me as a friend."

"Good. Actually, I am more interested in him than even in the research being done here."

"I fail to understand your interest, sir."

"I hardly understand it myself. But a human being is more than he usually knows he is, much more. I wonder if any of us have ever grasped the real potentialities in a human being and have thought of what we can actually do. I wonder if there are any limits - - -" The scientist's voice went into silence and he seemed to muse, lost in his own thoughts.

"Words I learned as a child in church come up here! *In my Father's house are many mansions* - - - Now if we consider that the words *my Father's house* really meant the human body, and that the many mansions are the many latent but unused abilities in every human being, the picture we have of homo sapiens is quite different."

Again the scientist mused. Jed felt cold chills move over his whole body. What was in the mind of this half-blind scientist?

"Sometimes, under the stress of great emergencies, a human being is capable of contacting one or more of the abilities latent within him," Kelgro continued. "I have seen this happen too often during the past four years to have any doubt about it. Sometimes I have thought I have seen men close to me contact something much greater than themselves. Again I don't know for sure. But I think it is possible that my aide who went insane and the man from the physics section may have made such a contact, unfortunately without being able to communicate it. Now as to Carter - - -"

Kelgar broke off speaking and looked up. Alarm bells were clanging in the corridor outside. Both Jed and Gro Kelgar knew the meaning of this sound. A man running down the corridor screaming, "Paratroopers! There must be millions of them!" only emphasized that meaning.

Jed felt his heart sink to the bottom of his stomach. The high command, on the basis of calculated risk, had estimated that this mountain fortress would not be attacked.

The high command had been wrong.

"I guess we go to our fighting posts," Jed said. Kelgro nodded. Down the corridor a woman was calling in a voice that was near panic, "General Kelgro!" She was repeating the words again and again.

Jed and the scientist moved to the door. A nurse was coming toward them. Leaning on her arm was Ed Carter. She caught sight of Kelgro.

"Oh, there you are, sir. You left orders that this man was to be brought to you at anytime - - -"

"Thank you. I left such orders, yes."

"I got to talk to you," Carter broke in. "But it's got to be in a special place where there's not any of the wild stuff running through the field."

"Eh? This wild stuff running through the field? I don't understand."

"The gravity field," Carter said. "I finally figured it out - - -"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" The sound that came from Kelgro was a pure gestalt Aha! except that it was drawn out much longer. "I know now. Come into this room."

Jed and the scientist supported the man between them. As Jed closed the door, Carter tried again to talk. A jolt of pain crossed his face and his eyes were suddenly wild. He shook his head trying to shake off the effects of the pain. "I don't care if it does destroy me. I've got to tell you."

"Lie down on the floor and don't try to talk," Kelgro said. "What you are trying to say can't be put into words. It

requires another medium of communication. Help him lie down, please, Jed. I want to get the current flowing through these circuits."

"Yes, sir." While Kelgro hastily inspected the apparatus in the room and began to close switches, checking meters, Jed helped Carter to the floor. The man lay on his back, his hands across his chest, his bandaged leg stiff and inert. He was no longer trying to speak.

In Jed was a feeling of utter unreality. Outside, he knew an attack was being launched, knew also that his place was there with the fighting men. Yet somehow his place was here too. He did not see how he could be in two places at once but this was the way he felt.

As Kelgro closed a final switch, a transformer throbbed and began to hum, leaking current through a faulty core. Jed rose to his feet, leaned against a work bench, and watched. He was becoming aware of a curious lightness in his body as if he were rapidly losing weight. As he lost weight, his mind seemed to be accelerating faster and faster. Thoughts were flickering across his mind faster than he could become aware of them, like a movie projector that was running too fast to be seen. A sense of something about to happen was coming up in him. All the world seemed to be standing on tip-toe. Fear was coming up in him, intruding like a dark nauseous slickness.

What difference did fear make now when outside all that he had known and had regarded as dear was going down in a final battle? There was no longer any need to be afraid because you had nothing left that you were afraid to lose. With this thought, the fear came up in him. He did not resist it. It hit him in the stomach and passed through his body, discharging itself in a series of waves that left goose bumps behind them. He was no longer afraid.

Kelgro was still examining meters. The man moved swiftly, his hands were deft, he seemed to sense rather than to see what the meters were revealing about the way the equipment was responding. He made a final adjustment. A smile appeared on his face.

"Do you find this strange, Jed?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. Yes, It's strange, but I kind of have a hunch you know what you are doing."

"Thank you." Kelgro moved and stood looking down at Carter. The spy knew he was there, a smile formed on his face, but he did not try to speak.

Kelgro lifted his head and seemed to sense what was happening in the room. "About eighty per cent of the gravity field is nullified now." He waited a moment, then spoke again. "About ninety per cent now. Ah - - - It's at maximum."

Quietly, Gro Kelgro laid down on the floor beside Carter.

Jed felt a daze come up in him. He did not know what he had expected but it had not been this action. Inside of him thousands of pressures seemed to be coming into existence. As he grew lighter and lighter, every muscle in his body, plus his blood stream, was trying to readjust to the changed weight. And - - - something came up from inside of him, came eagerly and suddenly, in a spurting flash of light, and looked through his eyes at the scene in front of him, then ducked hastily out of sight.

Jed gasped. On the floor, Kelgro was quiet. Carter did not move. But between them, in the space between their bodies, something was happening. Jed strained his eyes to see what it was - - -

Again something came up from inside of him, from some secret hiding place at the heart and the core of him, and looked through his eyes, scanned the room, and kept right on going - - - outward.

"The rock! The rock!" Jed gasped.

What he was trying to say was that he knew he was inside a mountain and that hundreds of feet of solid rock separated him from the outside world. He knew that he could not go through this

rock. He cried out that the rock would stop him. But the something that had come out from the core of him did not regard stone as a barrier. It went through the hundreds of feet of rock as if the stone had no existence.

He went with the something that went through the rock. It was he. The six feet of lithe flesh down there that he knew as a body, this was not he! He was a something that could move through solid stone.

"The rock?" The voice of his body whispered back to him as from a great distance. He heard it dimly, he knew it was his voice, but he knew he was not with it. The something which had come up from inside of him, and which he was, was outside the mountain, looking down. It was not inside the mountain. Perhaps his body was back there, but his body did not matter, much.

Below him a battle was raging. He could see men scrambling all over the mountain, he could see them thrusting explosives into sealed doors, and he could see the violent outward gush of flame. As he watched, he saw a whole line of transports come in over the mountain. Anti-aircraft tore at them but they kept getting through, to drop their loads of fighting men. Pounding in from the east was a whole line of huge transports, bringing more enemy fighters. Bombers were whistling through the sky unloading missiles on pin-point objectives.

Out yonder near the perimeter, where the enemy had been held at bay, so the high command had hoped - - -

He was back inside the mountain, in his body, looking down at two men lying on the floor. One man had a bandaged leg. The other man was old. Who were they, he wondered? What was that strange substance that looked like smoke which was rising from them. What - - -

Zip!

He was again above the mountain.

Back there inside the mountain, his lips formed words that told of body needs and of soul needs too. "Mary! Mary of Wichita." What he was seeing here he wished to communicate to her, to help her.

Zip! She was there in front of him. He called out to her.

As if she had heard him speak, the girl in the ragged nurse's uniform turned startled eyes toward him. She was a member of an ambulance pick-up unit that was moving inward now toward the threatened citadel. She had been here all the time, within a few miles of him, and he hadn't known it. At the sight of her, his heart leaped.

"Jed! Jed! Where are you?" She looked wildly around searching for bim.

"Shut up, Mary!" one of the other nurses snapped. "This is no time to blow your stack."

"But I heard him. It was Jed. He called to me." Calling his name, she ran wildly along the mountain trail. The others let her go. What difference did it make if one more nurse suddenly went off the deep end?

Zip! Without his willing it, Jed was again inside the mountain, watching a sight that left him bewildered but tremendously thrilled, watching a spectacle that he did not understand, yet understood completely too.

Something like gray smoke flowed out of the bodies on the floor. He knew he was not seeing this with his eyes yet he also knew he was seeing it, perhaps with some other perceptive organ. Instantly the smoke began to form balls that grew smaller in size. They became the size of a basketball, of a baseball, of an agate that a child might use. As they grew smaller, they became brighter.

Then they were only sparkles of star-dust.

Instantly they flowed together.

Somehow Jed knew that this was an event that was a cause of great rejoicing and at the same time it was a source of tremendous calamity, depending on the viewpoint from which it was observed.

As the two sparkles of stardust flowed together, they became brighter. Then they moved upward.

Jed knew what they were going to do. He also knew what he was going to do.

"Wait for me!" he screamed.

The sparkle of star dust stopped moving. Something began to go out of Colonel Jed Fennell that was like gray smoke. Swiftly it condensed to the size of a pinpoint, growing brighter as it grew smaller. When it was the size of a mote of gleaming star dust, it flowed into and joined the other.

Where there had been two, there was one. A third had joined. Where there had been three, there was now one.

That one also went upward through the stone as if the solid rock had no existence.

High in the air above the mountain, Elinel stopped his upward rush. He was free now and he knew it. He knew what had happened and how it had happened. For a moment he felt admiration for the Glom commander. "Hooking the disruptive beam into the gravity field of the planet was very clever. No matter what life form I built I could not bring two of the life-forms together without destroying one or both of them, because of the beam hooked into the gravity field. I could not bring two of my own particles together, for the same reason."

His admiration was short-lived. It gave way to a kind of anger as he fully realized what had happened to the life forms as they had tried to get back together. He put the anger aside, for the time being. The big hurdle had been passed but much remained to be done.

From within him, he began to generate a frequency that was actually a call. Then he waited.

Down below him a man suddenly stopped fighting and fell down as if dead. A smudge of gray smoke came out of his body. It condensed to the size of a sparkle of star dust, and hurled it, rejoicing, into the sky.

Then there were four.

Elinel continued generating the frequency.

Soon, from the mountain below him, they were coming by the dozens, sparkles of star dust leaping upward. Then they were coming by the hundreds, then by the thousands - - -

During the history of this planet, they had built themselves many life forms, dinosaur and saurian, fish and reptile, and had discarded each form as not being adequate, until they had found this final life form. This one had been better than any of the other forms they had created but it still had had the old, old defect - - - the law imposed by the frequency hooked into the gravity band - - - a total inability of any two units to understand that what they were really trying to do was to get together and to understand one another.

These human units had fought each other tooth and nail across the vast stretch of the centuries without understanding that they were really trying to get back together again. When they had slaughtered each other, the invisible sparkles of star dust had gone out to new members of the species waiting to be born, trying again and again to do what had to be done. There were billions of particles of Elinel. The forms had destroyed each other so fast that even a fecund reproductive system had hardly kept pace with the loss.

From the defenders within the mountain the sparkles came as Elinel's call grew stronger and stronger. Like the sound of the trumpet on Judgment Day, the frequency went out. The sparkles of star dust also came from the enemy. As they went upward to join the glowing body of the light creature, the fighting stopped. The roar of the guns began to go into silence, the sharp spitting of the rifles began to grow quiet. The transports droned in for a time longer but even this stopped when some startled observation plane pilot reporting that the fighting was stopping.

After the sparkles of star dust had

been gathered from around the mountain, Elinel increased the intensity of the frequency he was generating. Then they came from farther away. They came from all over the nation, from friend and from foe, from black, from white, from yellow, and from red. These were now words that had lost all meaning. When the continent of North America had been exhausted, the sparkles of star dust began to come from the islands of the sea, then from the other continents. Wherever they were on the surface of the Earth, as soon as they heard the calling frequency, they recognized it, and they left their hosts to answer. They came joyfully, dancing and darting through the air, they came gladly and happily, each one knowing that at long last he was coming back to the light creature where he belonged.

When the last sparkle was back home and had been reintegrated into his structure, Elinel was tremendous in size. He was bigger than the mountain below him, and brighter than the sun. He lifted himself up, in movements that were incredibly fast, gambolling in the far reaches above the upper atmosphere, figuratively stretching long unused muscles. He played there, for a while. The play was fun, but there were things he had to do. There was the frequency in the gravity beam - - -

He could follow this frequency to its source now. A flick of motion took him out to the satellite of this planet. The generator was there all right, hidden deep inside a crater, buried in stone. One blast of radiation destroyed this clever invention of the Glom commander.

On the surface of the planet below Elinel was - - - death, disorder, and confusion. In the room where the anti-grav unit still functioned, Jed oppened dazed eyes. He had fallen to the floor. Now he got slowly and laboriously to his feet and stared around him. Two bodies were lying on the floor. He saw them clearly but he did not know what they were. For that matter, he did not know what he was or where he was or what he was doing here.

Something had gone out of him, leaving a hollowness inside.

His body structure was continuing to function and would continue to function, for a while, on a stimulis-response. It had memories, of a sort, but no comprehension, no understanding. The intelligent entity that had invested it, forming the hidden and secret core of it, was - - - gone.

Jed did not understand.

Even in his lack of understanding, he was much better off than most of his kind. Perhaps the low gravity field accounted for it. Most of his kind got up, took one dazed look around them, and collapsed into death.

All over the Earth were a few mindless creatures who had once been human, a few stumbling idiots. And a multitude of dead forms. And - - - sorrow.

Elinel lifted up from the moon. In his mind was the thought of the Glom ships that had defeated him and had caused him to spend millenia here on this damp, dark planet. It would be fun to go back to the dark suns and to hunt up this particular Glom commander and really twist his tail. He started in that direction, then stopped. The Glom commander had been dead for uncounted centuries.

Well, it didn't matter much. The light creatures, his own kind, still existed. He started toward them, moving eagerly toward the place where the high gods go. He would have many strange adventures to tell them. And he was eager to get back home.

He went with a whoosh, then stopped. Something else? What was it? Oh, yes, this planet. He turned backward.

With his perceptives, he quickly saw what had happened on this lost world. The death of life-forms did not disturb him. They were inert matter and had been this before he had invested them. But there was something else - - - Oh, yes. He moved toward the moun-

tain where two of his light sparkles had first succeeded in knowing each other and in getting together. He sent his perception inside, to see what had happened there

Well, the young man was still alive. Almost mindless, but alive. The old man was still alive too, but was incapable of motion. The one with the broken leg had died. But the young man and the old man, they had something. On these two life-forms he had done a really superb job. And he might even do a better one.

Elinel set processes to work within his own structure.

Jed was bending over the body of Gro Kelgar, staring stupidly at it, wondering what it was, when the two sparkles of star dust came through the stone roof above him. He did not see them come, he did not see one of them flash into him, the second into Gro Kelgar, where they settled down as if this was home again, but he knew it had happened the instant it took place. Light dawning in his eyes, he stared at Gro Kelgar.

The scientist opened his eyes. Light dawned there too. The two men stared at each other.

"Say, I know you!" Jed gasped. "And I know who I am and I know what has happened." Elation rose in him. But there was a touch of sadness too.

Gro Kelgar came to his feet. "I know you too, Jed. And we can communicate now. More important, we can be!"

Ecstacy flowed through them. Suddenly they were dancing there in that room. Around them the world was dead and dying. But they were alive. And they had knowing, they had understanding, at last.

As they danced, Jed still knew that something was missing.

In the sky above them, Elinel radiated pleasure. He had sent two of his own sparkles of star-dust down to these life-forms, sparkles that he had created for this express purpose as he had seen the need down there. These sparkles had now invested the life-forms of the two men. Now that the radiation of the Glom commander no longer rode the gravity beam, there was no real barrier to them understanding each other and themselves. Thus they could make real progress.

He mused, considering the possibilities of that progress. Yes, even these life-forms could come eventually to the region where the high gods were. Of course, even with their new understanding, it would be a long task. But they could do it now, and have fun. Each new problem would be a new adventure, a new thrill, a new wonder.

Of course, the crudity of the life-form would inconvenience them, but they would learn how to create sparkles of star dust to invest the life forms. They would come to him and to his kind. It would be fun for them when they came and it would be fun for him too.

Very pleased, he lifted upward. Then he caught his motion again. Something still remained undone! Hastily he returned to the planet and began a frantic search, first of his sparkle that invested Jed, then of what Jed needed. Oh, yes, he saw the problem. He began a search of another kind.

Finally, he found her. Rumpled, her dress torn, her face tear-stained and dirty, she lay beside a mountain stream. But she was still alive. Gently Elinel lifted her.

Jed knew that something was still missing. "Gro, there's something we haven't got."

Kelgar's fine face showed sympathy and understanding and alarm. "Yes. There is - - -"

In the corridor outside a voice was calling frantically. "Jed! Jed! Where are you? I know you are here somewhere. Jed - - -"

Jed jerked open the door. Mary of Wichita came into the room and into his arms.

She too had found the understanding and the knowing. Now there was com-

pleteness and a sense of forward motion. And such happiness as neither of them had ever known.

Elinel lifted himself into the far reaches of space. He was heading home now. And he was pleased. He had left behind him, invested with a replica of his sparkles of star dust, a wise man. A scientist, these people called the wise man. He was one of the wisest this race had produced. From him would come much knowledge and direction of that which was to come.

Elinel had also left behind him a man strong in the splendid strength of youth, and a young woman. Thus the race would survive.

There was deep ecstacy in Elinel as he flashed upward through the far reaches of space. And behind him, on the planet where he had dwelt as an unwilling prisoner for so many millenia, was also ecstacy in three people, and the hope of the birth of a new world.

EDITORIAL

(*Continued from page* 4)

cade! Barry stopped by our home the week-end of September 15, and spent a day with us - - and gave us a look at the nearly completed second draft of "Last Summer Of Lorran", his 225,000 *word* novel! You read "Tri-Infinity" and then multiply it by five, and you'll get some idea of what Lorran is! Of one thing you can be sure; no other science fiction magazine in the field is thinking in the same terms we are - - and with as much imagination and daring. We have a feeling that science fiction has only begun! No stereotyped status quo for us, but *new*, fresh, exciting horizons!

Anyway, the March issue marks a milestone in the history, not only of OTHER WORLDS, but of science fiction. Pick it up and see! *Rap.*

THESE BACK ISSUES ARE STILL AVAILABLE

We have been amazed at the orders that have poured in for back issues ever since we made them available at 10c each. We felt that it would be better to have somebody enjoy them, than have them stacked in our warehouse. So, we made the offer. Now we are being rapidly depleted of many issues, and the list given below is all we have left—and many of these may be gone by the time we make out the list for next month. Bill Hamling, of IMAGINATION, thinks we are nuts to sell them at 10c—he says they'll sell out in the long run at 35c each, and I'm just throwing money away. Okay, but he seems to forget we aren't so much interested in money as in giving entertainment to our loyal readers—so, until the last copy on hand is gone, that 10c price sticks! So order away, friends — we'll supply them as long as they last, and it looks like it won't be long! Here's the list, as it stands now (and we are sorry to have had to disappoint so many of you with some of the issues you ordered—but it just couldn't be helped):

OTHER WORLDS:

No.	
16	January, 1952
19	June
20	July
21	August
22	October
23	November
24	December
25	January, 1953
26	February
27	March
28	April (Very short)
14-35	November, 1955
15-36	February, 1956
16-37	April
17-38	June
18-39	September
19-40	November

UNIVERSE:

No.	
3	December, 1953
4	March, 1954
7	September
8	November (Short)
10	March, 1955

SCIENCE STORIES:

No.	
1	October, 1953 (Very short)
2	December
4	April, 1954

(Note: Because of the strong demand for these issues, our offer of 10 free copies with subscription is withdrawn.)

GHOST PLANET

By Evelyn Martin

Some say a planet has its own life; and if this is so, could a planet itself be insane — and its insanity able to affect those who visit it?

SURE, I hated Edwina. I have never denied that. But I didn't kill her. I swear I didn't kill her!

These cold metal walls seem to be closing in. They will be coming for me soon . . . the captain of the police cruiser, the priests, and the guards. We will walk slowly down the gray corridor to the air lock. They will offer me a black hood. I wonder if I will accept it? I wonder if I can die bravely, like a man, or turn into a sniveling coward at the thought of the cold vacuum that is to be my resting place?

They say it is a humane method of execution. I wouldn't know. I won't be coming back to tell anybody whether it was humane or not, because we are light years from Lupus by now. On Lupus the dead do come back. I know. Edwina came back.

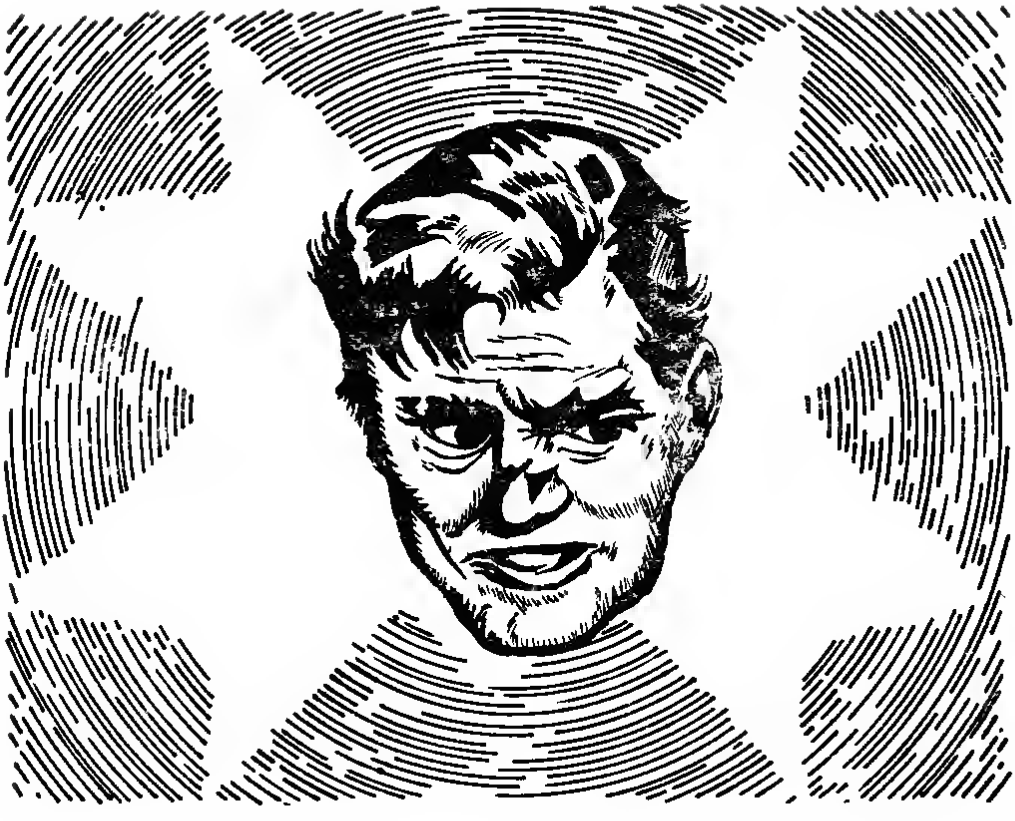
She was a lot older than I. She tricked me into marriage when I was a space-happy young punk fresh off my first moon freighter. Credits were burning a hole in my pocket, and Edwina was right there to help spread the conflagration. She didn't look so old, then . . . but, of course, any woman looks a lot different after you have been in space a while. I suppose the idea of approaching fatherhood appealed to my youthful ego when she told me she was pregnant. I married her, just before we shoved off for Saturn in '26.

She got what she wanted - - at least for a while. Her allotment was generous, and it would be increased after the baby's birth. I would be gone a long time, and she had both freedom, and the credits to enjoy my absence.

Neither of us could have foreseen what was to happen. Our ship made a crash landing on Saturn because of a defective tube. My right arm and shoulder were smashed, beyond the power of even the plastimeds to mend. Oh, they gave me an arm of sorts. It was all right to look at, but it served no practical purpose. They shipped me home under the distressed spaceman's clause, and pensioned me off like any old space dog who had served his time.

That made me a useless derelict at twenty. I had a wife, and a son I had never seen. All my belongings were in a duffle bag over my one good shoulder, and I had to break the news to Edwina. I did the only thing that seemed logical at the moment. I got drunk. Stinking.

The spaceport police must have found me and carried me home. The first thing I remember was waking up and feeling like a Martian sweebo had been nesting on my tongue. Edwina had turned on the vibro-massage, and I thought the bed would shake me to pieces. I groped for the switch with my right hand, until I remembered I couldn't feel anything as small as a vibro-switch. With a groan, I turned over on my side and snapped off the infernal mechanism with the



other hand.

I opened my eyes groggily. It took a while for things to focus clearly. When they did, I wished I had kept them shut. The dome unit was a mess. Edwina apparently rated two whole rooms because of the baby. I could hear her slamming around in the food center. My dirty clothes were all piled in a heap under my bed, boots on top. The bed sheets were gritty under my naked hips.

There was a baby unit in the corner, rocking lazily away, with the soft strains of some lullabye floating about it. I felt a sudden surge of tenderness. That would be my son.

Quietly, I slipped from the bed. I had to hold my head on my shoulders with both hands to cross the floor, but I wanted to see the kid. I noticed my feet were leaving obvious footprints on the dusty floor. By the fires of Sol, I didn't see how a woman could let a dome unit get that dirty . . . not with all the autodomestics that were incorporated in their very structure.

The kid was cute. He was snuggled under a blanket, pulled well up toward his chin. His forehead was damp, and no wonder. The place was like an oven. Balancing myself with my bad arm, I leaned over and snapped on the air conditioning. And hell broke loose.

Edwina came rushing in like a Jovian harpy protecting her young. Her voice screeched like a Tri-D with crossed wires. She snapped off the air-con, and turned her fury toward me.

"How dare you turn that chilly thing on, and subject little Edwin to draughts! Look at you! Drunk as soon as you hit port, instead of coming home to your wife and child like a decent man would do. The very idea! Probably chasing around with those spaceport floozies, with never a thought of what I have suffered

here alone, bearing your child, with you off on some God-forsaken planet. When will you be shipping out again?"

I tried to tell her she sure sounded anxious, in the futile moment when I thought she had stopped for breath, but it was no use.

"And look at you! Walking around in a decent home as naked as the day you were born. Well, you are not on one of your space ships, now, I'll have you know. You'll soon find out I'll not put up with your common ways. Cover yourself up, this instant!"

Feeling a little sick, I groped for my shirt. I had forgotten about my arm again, and the fingers wouldn't pick it up. She stood glaring at me, her eyes glittering evilly. How did I ever think she was pretty? Without the layers of cosmetics her face was hard and blurry. There were faint lines about her mouth and nose, and her hair stuck out in spirals around the blue curlers she wore in her lanky hair. Her body was flabby and sagging under the dirty lounge coat. I turned away in distaste.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched my awkward attempts to clothe myself.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "What's wrong with your arm?"

I had been too thoroughly psychoed to feel sorry for myself, but my voice was jagged with anger as I explained about my accident. To my surprise, she burst into tears.

For a moment I was touched by her solicitude, but not for long. It was Edwin she was worried about, and not me.

"Just like you, you space-hound! Go and smash yourself up like that so you can't work. It will take thousands to fix Edwin's legs. Thousands, do you hear me?"

I looked at her, stunned. "His legs? What's wrong with his legs?"

"Don't look so innocent," she snapped. "I'm convinced it was your defective genes that caused it. All that radiation, and all. You and your fine promises! When I think of all the men I could have married—"

I let her carry on, deaf to the sounds of her nagging voice. I strode to the baby unit and ripped the covers away from my son's little body. The twisted legs were a mockery of his fine chest and rosy body. I shuddered, uncontrollably.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I accused her furiously. "Why didn't you think I had a right to know? Why?"

"Why didn't I let him know, he says!" She mocked me cunningly. "You would have jumped ship, that's why. The System is full of men who have run out on their families, with all of space to lose themselves in. I love that baby, Jan, and by the fires of Sol, you are going to take care of it. I'm not giving you the opportunity to run out."

"Edwina - -" I spoke softly. "Didn't it ever occur to you that I might love the boy myself? "

"Then get the money for bis legs. They can be fixed by the time he is twelve. Get the money, Jan. Get the money."

I kept looking for work. Day by dragging day, Edwina kept up her constant nagging. My pension furnished us with a good living, and nobody was anxious to give a one-armed man any extra gravy. In the baby unit, my little son's twisted legs were a constant reproach.

It was about that time that Edwina bought the ancient rocking chair at an auction sale. Buying old, uncomfortable furniture was the fashion, just then. It sure set me back enough - - credits we needed for other things. It was an atrocity, a squat contraption of wood. Yeah, real wood. It was that old.

It squeaked, too. Squeak, thunk, squeak, thunk, all through tbe night. Got to where Edwin wouldn't go to sleep unless he was rocked in that chair. Edwina claimed it rested his little back. I think that rocking chair was one thing that started my drinking again. That - - and Lupus.

I'm not sure exactly when Edwina

started talking about Lupus. The idea just seemed to suddenly come into her head. One day she was just nagging about my drinking - - the next day she added Lupus.

Every space man knew about Lupus. A gold mine for the man with nerves enough to go there - - and stay for five years. Funny things happened on Lupus. Things a man couldn't talk about, and keep his sanity.

I saw a man, once, who spent his five years on Lupus. He was a young man, but his hair was stark white. They had him in restraint, the day I saw him. His forehead was swathed in bandages where he had tried to dash his brains out against the metal walls of his cabin.

There were rare ores and oil fields on Lupus, materials the space hungry world needed, must have, until others were found. The ores were mined with the souls of men in lieu of delving tools, and the oils mixed with the blood of the dying. The other stories? Well, you didn't talk about them. They couldn't be true. The only thing you could be sure of was that when you left Lupus, if you ever did, you would have enough money to spend your reclining years in some comfortable sanitarium.

I tried to tell Edwina, but she wouldn't listen. She went to Interplanetary Employment and found out all she wanted to know about Lupus. Edwin was too young to be affected by the atmosphere there, and the credits involved sent Edwina's eyes revolving like pinwheels. She was just stupid enough to think nothing could affect her, and I didn't matter. I never would have agreed to it if it weren't for Edwin. He was mine, and I loved him.

So of course, Edwina won, like she always did. I signed up as a pilot on an air-van. I was scared, but Edwina wasn't. She packed up, as cheerfully as a jollivan.

The rocket departure time was early in the morning. We spent the night at the space-port hotel. I had left the packing to her. When we went down to weigh in, damn if Edwina didn't have that rocking chair piled on top of our luggage. I gave an unconscious start.

"Edwina, you know we can't take that thing to Lupus with us. We are only allowed a few precious pounds. and that thing is so unwieldy—"

"I'll thank you, Jan, not to refer to Edwin's chair as 'that thing.' Of course it is going to Lupus with us. Edwin has to be rocked."

"And just what did you throw out to make room for that thi..that chair?"

"That useless bag of microfilm you didn't need. I never saw any sense in your packing it in the first place."

"By the fires of Sol!" I breathed a prayer for strength. "Five years on Lupus without a book, or a picture, or any form of amusement! Edwina, are you mad?"

"You don't need those things. Why, look at me! I never read a book in my life! I am a mother, and my first thought is for your crippled son, deformed because of your excesses. The son I bore you alone while you prowled the spacelanes . . . "

"Edwina, please!" I muttered uncomfortably. Her voice had begun to rise and people were looking at us curiously. Let her have the damned chair. Just let us get to Lupus, and get it over with, and maybe I would be free of this eternal nagging. Most important . . Edwin would walk.

Lupus didn't seem to be so bad, at first. The housing was better than it was on Earth. We had five whole rooms, more than a family of six would rate back there. Edwin had his own room, and Edwina spent most of her time with him, rocking, in tbat eternal rocking chair. She didn't like for me to go near Edwin. Said I wasn't good enough to touch him.

We went through indoctrination the next day. I could already feel the strange anxiety that permeated the air

around me. Edwina didn't seem to notice anything. She settled into our five rooms as though she had always lived there, and hustled me off to work as soon as possible.

The job as air-van pilot wasn't difficult. It felt good to be working again. There was little or no strain on my injured arm. I was beginning to feel like a man again as soon as I took her up. It didn't last long, though.

I had a co-pilot in the air-van with me. He was a gangly youth from Centauri, and a pretty nice guy. I liked him fine . . . as long as I knew him, which wasn't to be very long. He went off the beam that very morning, with me not used to tbe screwy things Lupus did to a man.

It was an ugly day. A day that seemed to glower, and hide its anger behind a sulky mask of clouds. It was a day made for trouble, and anxiety. Lonnie seemed to have had his share of it. He had developed a nervous tic under one eye. It made him appear to be constantly winking. He didn't talk much. That's what made his outburst all the more startling.

"Have you felt them watching you, Jan?" His voice held its ordinary conversational level at first. "The eyes, I mean. Thousands of 'em, all accusing you of everything you ever did wrong in your life."

"No, Lonnie." I turned in surprise.

"I haven't been on Lupus long, you know. Anyhow, what could a kid like you have done that would be so bad?"

"You're on their side!" His voice rose in pitch, became keening. "They sent you here, you watch me! I'm going to fool you, though. I'm going to fool you all!"

"Don't let it get you, Lonnie. Sit down, boy!"

I'll remember his scream as long as I live. We hit an air pocket just then, and I didn't have time to switch to automatic. I felt the cold blast of air on my back when he opened the hatch doors, and his diminishing scream scraped down my spine like a rusty nail on slate.

I couldn't land on the rocks below. Sick to my very soul, I carried the ship back to port. If that was what Lupus did to a man, by the fires of Sol, I wanted none of it. What was the cursed ingredient in the atmosphere that took decent kids like that, and drove them mad?

I gave my report to the authorities, feeling worse all the time. It didn't help to find out he had a wife. Somebody had to tell her. I felt kind of responsible, and though I didn't relish the job, I decided to tell her myself. If I could only have understood what Lonnie was trying to tell me, perhaps I could have stopped his headlong rush from the open hatch, and he would be alive instead of a smashed pulp on the inaccessible rocks.

His wife's name was Laine. They had no children. I was glad of that. All the way out to her quarters, I kept dreading the sight of her. I knew I would catch it for being late for Edwina's half-prepared meal, but somehow I didn't care. I was thinking about the girl, alone and frightened, and the boy whom she had loved.

It wasn't easy, telling her, seeing her tears. Laine was the kind of girl a man wanted to protect . . . little, and slender, with eyes that would be smiling when they were not torn with grief. I tried to tell her about the things Lonnie had said, but she stopped me.

"I knew it would happen," she said dully. "It had to happen. I told him not to come, but he wouldn't listen. I can feel it in the air about us . . . an invisible menace, a threat to your very sanity. It would be a lucky man who lives through Lupus."

I suddenly felt awkward, standing there before her, with my helmet in my one good hand. She was a pretty thing. Too young and pretty to be a widow. "What are you going to do now,"

I blurted. "Are you going home alone?"

"No." I was amazed at the firm set of her chin. "Lonnie needed the money five years on Lupus would bring. He needed it for us, and for our families. You don't know what it is to be born on Centauri Six. Trying to farm in the eternal rain, watching the fungus eat away your crops, and spread like a pestilence across the land, while the babies and the old folks die from lack of food. It takes money to travel the spaceways. Well, my folks and Lonnie's are going to have that chance. Lonnie died for it. There is work on Lupus for women as well as men."

I hated to think of her staying here, prey to the madness that lay all about us. I realized it was none of my business, but if I had a wife like her, instead of Edwina . . .

"If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know." I felt like cradling her in my arms, and protecting her against the loneliness that was to be her lot, but there was nothing I could do. I had Edwina to think about, and Edwin.

I didn't try to see her again. The days settled into a monotony of nightmare. Lupus was a land of haunted people. I realized that more and more as the days passed, and the nights. The nights were the worst. Edwin would cry out, and Edwina would rush to his side. Taking him into that big rocking chair, she would begin to rock. Creak, thump, Creak, thump, all through the night, until I felt that I was going out of my mind. I dared not say a word, lest I loose a harangue that would last through the night.

I would lie alone in my bed, nerves shrieking under the assault of that monotonous noise, and the high pitched keen of Edwina's singing. The night would press in on me, smothering me, sitting on my chest like a giant shadow of evil. I tensed against the fear, the unknown horror that haunted me night and day. I could recognize the dread scourge of Lupus reaching out for my reasoning, trying to make me the ravening animal Lonnie had become when he dashed from the ship. I fought with every ounce of strength within me, fought the dark and the fear, and the constant creak of that damned chair.

I suppose I was so involved in my battle with myself, that I failed to notice how pale and haggard Edwina was becoming. I had ceased to look upon her as a person. There was no tenderness between us, no shared moments that were the sacred right of man and wife. The only times I ever touched her were in sheer animal passion. She made me feel degraded by her scathing words for hours afterward. My life had become a dreaded round of going to the mines, coming home, trying to sleep, and fighting the sound of that infernal chair echoing in my ears.

I would never have believed anything was wrong with her, if she had not collapsed while she was holding Edwin. The child's screams brought me out of my customary stupor, and I rushed into the room with alarm. She had fallen sideways, out of the rocking chair, and the dancing shadows of its diminishing movements were flickering on the night shaded walls.

I placed Edwin in his bed first, and then lifted Edwina. She was strangely light in my arms. She had lost a lot of weight, become thin and worn. Suddenly I was frightened . . not the unhealthy fear of Lupus, but the fear of a man when he faces a widower's future with a crippled son.

I called Emergency, speaking loudly above the sounds of Edwin's frightened sobs. It wasn't any time at all before a copter landed with a medic from the Main Office. He closeted himself with Edwina, and I seated myself in the hated rocking chair with Edwin.

It had been a long time since I had held him in my arms, and looked into his little face. He was a handsome kid.

The top of his head smelled real sweet. I hugged him close, and the crying stopped.

The medic came in, followed by a nurse. I motioned to Edwina's room. They entered, as I continued to rock. In a short time the medic was back, alone.

"Your wife is very ill. You should have notified us of her condition sooner."

"I didn't know," I said in surprise. "She passed her physical fine when we left Earth."

"Well, she isn't fine now." He looked at me curiously. "I'm leaving the nurse with her. I'll look in again tomorrow."

As soon as he left, I put Edwin to bed, and peeped through the bedroom door at Edwina. She was lying like a statue, mouth sunken, breath blowing her lips in and out. Her hands looked like claws on the coverlet. The nurse was a shrouded form, back toward me, working in the corner.

"Jan!" I was startled to hear Edwina speak. "Don't hide there, peeping in like a fool!"

I entered the room, noticing the gleam of her eyes beneath half-closed lids.

"What's the matter with me, Jan? What are you trying to do to me?"

"Hush, Edwina. It's only Lupus. Realize that, and you will be all right."

"You want me to die, don't you?" Her eyes narrowed into cunning slits. "Just you remember! You better look after Edwin. He has to be rocked. If *I* can't do it, then *you* better do it, or else. You remember my words, Jan."

"Sure, Edwina. Sure." I swallowed with a suddenly dry throat.

She grimaced, as though with pain, and went to sleep again. Outside, Edwin woke at the sound of our voices. "Mommy," he wailed. "Mommy!"

The nurse turned, and I was suddenly aware of her face. "Hello, Jan." She smiled. It was Laine.

She walked out to take my son. It felt like a house of death, as I followed her through the darkened hall. The rocking chair seemed to huddle over Edwin like an avenging angel, its shadow spreading over the room, the darkness eating up the light.

Laine took Edwin into her arms, and began to massage his little back. He quieted, magically.

"What are you doing here?", I asked stupidly.

"I'm a nurse. I told you there were jobs for women as well as men on Iupus. Your wife seems to be very ill."

"Yes."

Her eyes were gentle. "I overheard your conversation, in the bedroom. It's only Lupus. I am sure you realize that. I lost Lonnie, the same way."

I couldn't tell her Edwina had always been the same shrew. Not now, and seem to be at all human. I smiled, and let it pass.

Laine was an angel. She comforted Edwina, babied Edwin, prepared my meals, and brought sunshine to my disorganized existence. Edwina hated her. She nagged her unmercifully, thinking of every disagreeable duty to antagonize her new nurse. I suppose Edwina knew before I did that I was in love with Laine.

I was singing when I came home, that night three weeks later. Laine had Edwin sitting up for the first time, on a blanket on the middle of the floor. He was gurgling and laughing, more like a normal child than he had ever been. They made a pretty picture, there together on the floor.

Laine saw me, and smiled. "Now, Edwin," she coaxed. "Now!"

Unbelieveably, Edwin lifted his little body with his hands, and with an effort, raised his body to his knees. He could only hold the position for a moment, before he fell flat on his little tummy. I expected the familiar wail, but instead he laughed, with a kind of chuckle.

"Edwin fall," he said as an anti-

climax.

"Edwin!" I could have cried. I fell on my knees, lifting him exuberantly. "Laine, you have worked a miracle!"

We were there, the three of us, laughing and crying together, when a sudden noise made me look up in alarm. Edwina had struggled out of bed, and was standing at the door, face drawn in pain, and eyes as malevolent as a pinsks.

"Murderers!" she hissed "You think I don't know what goes on behind my back! Now you are trying to kill my son! I'll curse you both, you evil doers! You think I don't know . . . but I know, I know! I've written to Headquarters about you two."

"Edwina!" Laine was on her feet in an instant. "You must now leave your bed. You know what the Medic said about exertion!"

"Yes, me in bed and you two making love behind my back! Don't think I don't know what goes on in the night, when you think to put me to sleep with drugs!"

"Come, now, come." Laine was talking soothingly, trying to persuade her to come back to her bed.

'I'll never die," Edwina screamed. "Never! My Edwin has to be rocked. Promise me! My baby has to be rocked."

"Of course, Edwina. Of course." Laine was leading her back to the bed now. Edwin was screaming in fear at the loud voices and the sight of his mother. I could do nothing. I hated Edwina. I hated her then, as much as it is possible for me to hate another human being.

I heard a gasp from the other room. "Call Emergency," Laine called sharply. "At once!"

Edwina never regained consciousness. Laine worked with the Medic, worked like a machine, but to no avail. Edwina died, mumbling hysterically that Edwin had to be rocked in the moment of her death.

The only time I felt a little sorrow at her death was when I stood by her grave in the cemetary of Lupus. It wasn't a lonely grave, by any means. The hills were lined with the crude monuments of those who had given their lives to the brutality and mental instability of Lupus. Edwina had come here to die, where she thought perhaps she would leave me. She had been a bitter, cruel woman, but in the end she had only cheated herself. Hers had been a barren life, and a barren death, except for her strangling love for Edwin.

Edwin had to go to the Central Children's Care Center during the day. He hated the C.C.C.C. I was trying to work, and take care of him myself at night. It was really rough. I saw Laine a lot, down at the C.C.C.C., but it wasn't the same as having her in the house. I knew I was in love with her now. So much in love with her that it hurt me inside, where it didn't show.

I tried to remember about rocking Edwin, but I was tired when darkness fell at last. The first couple of weeks, as soon as I heard him cry, my feet hit the floor. Laine said children were creatures of habit, and he was used to being rocked every night. I wasn't thinking about what Laine said, though, to be honest, the night I didn't go to him. I was just dog tired.

I heard his wail through the thin walls, but the bed felt too good to go out into the other room. I turned a deaf ear to his wails, thinking he would go back to sleep. The sound of his crying was actually lulling me to sleep, when it stopped so suddenly I woke.

It was then that I heard the noise . . . the familiar noise that made my blood run cold. Creak, thump . . . creak, thump. It was the rocking chair.

I felt a sudden cold mist of perspiration on my forehead. The house was locked tight, and there was nobody within its walls but Edwin and me. I was asleep, and Edwin couldn't move

alone. Yet the chair was rocking. I forced myself from the bed, in cold fear.

I could see the shadow of the monstrous thing before I entered the door. It was moving, slower and slower, as though someone had just left it. I approached it slowly, doubting my own eyes. It was moving . . . but, Praise be to Sol, it was empty.

Edwin was in bed, tucked in carefully, the film of sleep already upon his eyes.

"Son . ." my voice was a rasp on the quietness. "Son, did I hear you crying?"

"Edwin all right. Mommy came and rocked me to sleep."

His words poured over me in a sickening wave. It couldn't be . . . it could never be! I left him there, and consigned the night to forgetfulness. It was a nightmare. I could never believe otherwise, and keep my sanity.

But that wasn't the last time. Every night, as soon as Edwin began to cry, there would go the awful noise of the chair. Creak, thump, creak thump, echoing against the walls of the night. I couldn't stand it. Finally I knew that another night would drive me insane. I could never catch her at it. Always, when I approached, the chair was rocking into stillness.

That was when I asked Laine to marry me. I was the most surprised person on Lupus when she said yes. It was scandalous, our marriage a scant month after Edwina's demise, but I had to have her. The shifting winds were still blowing the loose ground from Edwina's grave when Laine became my wife.

I thought surely now, the horror would cease. Instead it became worse. The very first night that Laine lay in my arms, we heard it. Yes, she heard it too. At least that gave me proof of my sanity.

We went together to Edwin's room that night. The chair was rocking, imperceptively, and Edwin was smiling, a contented child's smile. Laine went to him, spoke to him gently.

"You've learned to move about since Laine left, haven't you, dear? Do you like to rock?"

"Mommy rocks Edwin. Every night, Mommy rocks Edwin. Edwin loves Mommy."

Laine turned to me, her face white. "Jan, it can't be. Both of us know it can't be. It's Lupus, you know it's Lupus!"

I was cursing, monotonously, driving my fist again the metal wall of the room. Laine shook my shoulder, impotently. "Jan, stop it. stop it, do you hear? I lost one husband to Lupus. I'll not lose two. We'll burn the chair tomorrow, do you hear me? We'll burn the chair tomorrow!"

I did not sleep. Neither did Laine. We both pretended, but there could be no sleep in that haunted house. We waited for the dawn, in the most miserable wedding night two people ever experienced. Edwina would never let me go. She was reaching her cold fingers upward from the grave, strangling the only fine thing I had ever known, keeping her suffocating hold on her child, even in death.

With the dawn, we consigned the chair to the flames. It seemed to writhe like a living thing, as the flames curled about it, turning the ancient wood into ashes. Somehow, I felt better when the last bit of it was gone.

Laine was in my arms, her mouth soft against my own. "I won't lose you to Lupus, Jan. I'll fight them every step of the way . . . the mist, the invisible thing that haunts us, all the ghosts in the world. I love you darling."

We went back into the house. It seemed more peaceful. I didn't go to work. Laine and I had our belated wedding night, and in the light of day, the terror was gone.

But, as always, night must come. Laine bathed Edwin, prepared him for bed. We slept.

I think both of us heard him cry. I felt Laine's hand touch me, warmly. "I'll go tonight, dear. There is nothing to fear, now."

I saw her go, her body a spear against the light. Then I heard the sound again . . . creak, thump, creak, thump . . . .

I think I screamed. I think I screamed even before Laine. I rushed toward the sound of her scream, my fear a living thing that made a ravening animal of me. I cannot describe what I saw in that room. The chair was back, the damnable chair that was a cursed thing. Laine was lying, a crumpled form, at my feet. I could see that she had been horribly strangled. And the thing . . . the thing in the chair that held Edwin. It cackled, and laughed . . . "I told you Edwin had to be rocked. I'll never leave him, Jan. Never!"

They arrested me at Edwina's grave. They said I was trying to get to her with my hare hands, but that is the part I don't remember. They said I killed Laine, my darling, my beautiful, my wonderful Laine. They said I killed Edwina, too. She had written Headquarters the letter . . . had named Laine as the woman I was trying to kill her for. So there is no use trying to fight. No use at all. They say I went homocidally mad on Lupus, and they are going to kill me.

I don't think I am afraid. I have nothing left. They have even taken my son away. God grant me grace to die like a man, and to spare me the sight of Edwina. I hear them coming now. Slowly, Slowly . . . .

It is as though I am under anaesthetic. Something is wrong . . Everything whirling, whirling, I see faces above me . . .

"He's coming out of it, now." The green shrouded medic spoke to the girl with the anxious face.

"But will he know me? Will he remember?"

"Some do, some don't. If he had kept that hallucination that he was about to be executed, to the bitter end, he would never have recovered. Move over here, now, so he can see you."

The girl moved closer, her hair a bright halo about her face.

"Jan," she spoke softly. "Jan, it's Laine."

The man on the table opened his eyes, lay quiescent for a moment, and then began to struggle helplessly against his restraining bonds.

"Everything is all right, Jan." Laine spoke soothingly. "We are far away from Lupus now. You are going to be all right."

"But Edwina? And you . . . I'm out of my mind, Laine. You can't be here."

"Everything happened just as you remember it until Edwina's death. Then Lupus began to get you. Nothing else was true. Edwin is here, with me, and we are going back toward a new future together."

"Laine, Laine! How can I remember such horror, so well?"

"I told you, darling. I lost one husband to Lupus. I intend to keep you."

Gently, she kissed the salt tears from his eyes.

Ray Palmer, Amherst, Wisc.

DEAR RAY: Please enter my subscription for Other Worlds for the next 12 issues. I enclose $3.00.

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personals

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17) with people who live near me. Richard Brown, 127 Roberts St., Pasadena, Calif . . . I need certain issues of these *EC comics* - - *Weird Science, Weird Fantasy, Vault of Horror, Tales from the Crypt, Crime SuspenStories, Haunt of Fear, Two-Fisted Tales,* and *Crypt of Terror.* I also want any 1950-or earlier *EC* titles not listed above. These include *Crime Patrol, War Against Crime, International, Fat and Slat,* etc. I will either buy or trade for any of the above. I have about 300 *EC's* and a limited amount of sf material to sell or trade for *EC's, Bradbury* material, and *Roger Price* material. Anybody that has any of these things or who wants *EC's* please send a list to Esmond Adams, 432 Locust Street, Huntsville, Alabama . . .Wanted: *magazines* (must be in good-very good conditions with allowances for age and availability) *Weird Tales,* 1923-1940. *Magic Carpet Stories* all issues, *Planet Stories* 1939-1944, *Amazing Stories* 1926-1930 *Comics: Brick Bradford,* 1, 2, 3, 4 *Planet Comics* 1-66 *Strange Worlds* 5, 7 *Blue Bolt* 105, 108, 109, 111 *Captain Science* 2, 3 *Valor* 1, *Mad* 22 *Pogo* 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10. Most E. C. comics, stf-weirds of all kinds and early comics of the 1938-41 period generally. *Books*: published by Arkham House. Those by C. A. Smith & Lovecraft particularly. Many stf-fantasy magazines for sale. *Amz, FA. Planet, TWS, SS, WT,* etc. write for list. Paul Kalin, Sweet Springs, Missouri.

LETTERS

Dear Mr. Palmer:

I thoroughly enjoyed "Reluctant Eve", even though it was condensed. I believe that everybody who read it did also. It was unusual. Top honor, however, should go to the illustrations . . . no one but Virgil Finlay. I think that "Other Worlds" is taking up where "Startling Stories" left off. With the long novels it will be better.

"The Fires of Kessa" was well worth reading. In fact anything is when it is by Don Wilcox, he is one of my favorite writers ranking not too low below Hamilton Merwin, Gunn, and a few others.

Long Live "Other Worlds" . . . now with a happy future.

Less condensations and continued novels.

James W. Ayers
609 First St.
Attalla, Ala.

Dear Ray:

The new *Other Worlds* is terrific! In the few years that I have been reading Science Fiction (only four), I have never read a better, more thrilling story than "The Timeless Man." I don't know who this guy, Roger Arcot, is, but whether he's a pen name or a new author, I want MORE!

And as for short stories . . . Well, I only hope you continue printing such masterpieces as "Cat Astrophy", "A Witch in Time" (really hilarious), "A Bundle from Heaven", and "The Phantom Milkman." I've purchased a few back issues of Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adv. from the early forties, and only your short stories (along with those in *Imagination*) come anywhere near equaling the greats published then.

Also, I'm awfully glad to hear you've gotten hold of Don Wilcox. I hope "The Fires of Kessa" is equal to my expectations. Don has written some great stuff in the past but I'm sure he can surpass it. How about getting him to write another fantastic novel like "Mademoiselle Butterfly" or "Leopard Girl?" These were Wilcox at his best.

But whatever you do Ray keep up the fine quality stories now in OW's pages. And I'll be waiting breathlessly for "The Metamorphs" next issue.

Bob Hall
621 Elm Ave.,
San Bruno, Calif.

Dear Ray:

In some respects, OW is improving. Let's see, I'll just take this Aug . . . wups, September issue from cover to cover. The cover, to begin with, is not so hot. For that kind of painting, go to H. W. McCauley. And I see you're fea-

turing SVEN again . . . The editorial: there speaks the one and only Ray Palmer. One way or another, you always make them interesting.

To the stories: A WITCH IN TIME was very, very funny. I emitted various forms of the laugh as I read it. I didn't exactly roll on the floor, though. CAT ASTROPHY (yech! the title!) was very good, suspenseful writing. And to the main feature: I saved up the first installment. Then I read the whole thing all in this one evening. And, you know, for once you're right. There has been nothing better in OW, ever! But . . . first you said it was the finest in ten years, then the greatest ever. Tell us now: of all the novels you have described with your customary superlatives, which was second best? And which as good? Your editorial judgment is, considering your tastes, good, but you have fallen into the Hollywood habit of advertising. If you call a story magnificent, it can be expected to be fairly readable - - such as the many-titled one . . .

Finally, the thing I have been wondering about, on and off, for close to a year. Really, Ray, you didn't have to. You could have summarized the story in one sentence and used the space for something worthwhile. Shades of Jay Score! Like Adam and Eve stories (you have not yet been forgiven for RED CORAL), these things are becoming a plague! Every stf writer has to do at least one in his career. And you have the nerve to put this blurb on the cover: "A Man with Guts." Well, anyway, It wasn't very long . . .

I suppose there will never be such letter sections as of old, where editors swapped ingenious insults with the readers. For that, many give thanks. But there is the other extreme - - and that's where every other mag ('cept a SF, which is a special case) is now. Yours is now the only one with any sort of pep in it. You seem to get letters from special types of readers. There are the old-timers who gush praise; there are the discontented fen who are sick of your science-fiction-as-it-should-be campaign; there are the satisfied neofen and assorted others.

Shall I stop this routine letter hacking and say something to provoke comment? Not for its own sake, of course. I like your mag - - at last, again - - and would not knock it for the sake of knocking. But . . .

I'm getting sick of your mighty campaign for GREAT science fiction! I do not doubt that you have good stories on hand. If THE TIMELESS MAN is typical, I shall be very pleased. But get rid of your superlatives and just deliver the goods! I don't think they help you sell a single copy. I'm sure that many of your readers have been reading your mags long enough to be used to them.

Do you think your pulp format has really helped you? I have the suspicion that, in most cases, it only gets *less* display space for the mag. Many newsdealers, you see, have racks where they put their digest size stf, western, and detective mags, covers facing out. The shipments of those mags are big enough so they don't waste the space. But OW is too large to fit. Besides, very few copies arrive - - and so all the buyer sees is the spine of the magazine. You call this better display?

Besides, your cover design looks not-so-hot. I still think the best you'd do is digest size, with painting covering the whole space, except for horizontal bands for the name of the mag and the lead story. Sure it's the usual thing . . . and what better could you do?

I'd like to analyze the growing dissatisfaction with today's stf in certain circles. Now I haven't been around long enough to know what stf was like in the good old days, but I suspect that the old time fans who yearn for it will forever be disappointed. Let's accept this definition: science fiction is fiction published in magazine and book form under the label "science fiction". For now, disregard all other definitions. That gets rid of the old-timers who yell that the stuff published today isn't really stf. Follow that up and *date*: stf, 1956 is not stf, 1936. Science fiction is in a continual process of change. So are the people, as individuals and as a group, who read stf. As an individual, I do not react to stories I read in 1952 (when I really got started) in the same way I react to stories now. I have changed. Also, the stories, and, since each is different, I should say, general subject matter, etc., have changed. Nothing will ever be the same again. So there!

I am puzzled now. Maybe my thinking is muddled because it's late at night I'm writing this. Clearly there is no use in arguing about what's wrong with stf, or

when stf was at its best. By all appearances, dissatisfaction is pretty general. But always it's the older fen who don't like it any more. However, since new readers are being gained all the time, isn't it likely that such a process can continue for a long time without affecting stf? Just keep on printing the best stories you can get, and there will always be people who will read them with enjoyment. Damn it, there must be still enough people who can enjoy stories no matter what the subject matter (as long as the authors don't say the same thing over and over - - like Sturgeon)! I still like a fitting proportion of the stories in GALAXY, F&SF, aSF, OW - - mags with as differing policies as I can think of. A few I don't read, the others are still all right, except Hamling's two mags. Are you stealing his better authors away from him? He used to publish good stuff . . .

It grows late, and I'm definitely running down. Better stop here before I get quite incoherent. Remember now, I'm still with you, just deliver the kind of stories you're supposed to . . .

Till the November (December?) ish—

Dainis Bisenieks
336 S. Warren
Saginaw, Michigan

You want me to tell you the novel I think is BEST I ever read. That is easy! THE GODS OF MARS, by Edgar Rice Burroughs; and the second best: "THE MOON MAID". The TIMELESS MAN I consider to be the best OW has ever published, but it won't be that for long! I've got TWO novels waiting publication which are BETTER. So, when I run them I suppose I'll say "the greatest ever". But your objection to superlatives is something I can't quite agree with. Using superlatives is the ONLY way to express ENTHUSIASM via the printed word. When you read superlatives from me, translate it into "tone of voice", and you'll hear the excitement and pleasure in it! However, it is true that I am naturally exuberant, and I frequently am surprised to find that something I enjoy hugely gets just an approving nod from somebody else. For instance, Bill Hamling, every time I point out a particularly beautiful woman, looks at me with a blank stare, and says: "She's beautiful?" And you should see the hags he points to! His taste sure runs to the weird! Everybody has their opinion, I guess. But this time, it seems, even you agree with me! Maybe I didn't use enough superlatives for THE TIMELESS MAN, eh?

As for my "man with guts", it was a pun. Didn't you get it. Robot - -man with guts. Dig it, man?

What do you mean there will never be letter sections where editors swap insults with the readers. What about that slob, Joe Gibson?

Now about the pulp format. No, it hasn't helped (sales, that is). But the magazine does contain more wordage and the printing cost is the same. So, as far as the readers are concerned, they have benefited. Okay, the pulp format stays! As for display, under your theory even larger magazines with no backbone at all, are invisible. MOST magazines today are invisible on the crowded stands. It is the one problem it seems impossible to lick. And if you have only a few copies on display, they certainly ARE lost! OW has that handicap. But it had it even worse as a pocket-size. We've noted a better display on most newsstands - - and we're satisfied.

We'd put a full size painting on our large size, but those added square inches of engraving ALMOST DOUBLE THE COST! Do you have any idea how costs zoom upward for every little thing you add to a magazine?

Science fiction will never be analyzed - - but the enjoyment from it can be. We feel that OW is giving more enjoyment every issue.

No, we're not stealing Hamling's authors away from him. He's publishing better stuff than ever, but so are we. That's the idea behind all this campaign of mine - - to induce the whole field to be more competitive, and more enthusiastic. Editors should enjoy their work, too! It is what's necessary to make them do their best. Frankly, in the past, Ham and I have shirked a bit - - but no more. As for Ham falling a bit behind, he's just a youngster yet! After all, your editor has 31 years experience! Ham will read OW too (we send him a free copy) and he'll be spurred to better things. That's the way we want it - - every magazine in the field. If ALL magazines set out to be constantly more excellent, stf will come back with a bang. So here's a toast: To GREAT science fiction in EVERY magazine, and SUCCESS TO All! ..... Rap.

WHY DON'T YOU PULL YOUR HAIR OUT BY THE ROOTS AND HAVE DONE WITH IT?

You might as well, if you're going to let dandruff and scale and skin rash make you bald as an egg. You've bought plenty of preparations, and they don't work, you say? Of course they haven't! You've probably been cheated as many times as I have. I'll bet I've spent hundreds of dollars on jim-dandy goo, and wound up with worse dandruff than I started with. Made me plenty mad, too. I always get mad when I think of the lousy junk designed to chisel your honest dollars out of you. Mad enough so that when I find something good, I'm not bashful about telling my friends about it. And OTHER WORLDS readers are my friends. I had dandruff all my life, and despaired of getting rid of it, until one day Ken Arnold (the flying saucer man) left a half bottle of Turn-er's at my home, and flew off to Boise without it. I tried the stuff, because Ken's no sissy, and doesn't put perfume on his hair. Well, in one week my dandruff was gone! And my hair had begun to darken. My wife tried it, and her rash disappeared. You can bet we wrote Ken in a hurry and asked where he got it! And now, we're telling you. But don't just take our word for it—here are a few testimonials from our readers, to back us up.

As I have about used up one bottle of your hair preporation, please send me another. I have had very good results in ridding myself of dandruff and itching. Lionel O. Brandberg, Sharon Springs, Kans.

Enclosed find money order for $10.00 for two more bottles of Turn-er's as soon as possible. You sure found a good product. In the sixth application my dandruff was cured. Thanks to you. It does all you say and more, too. And it sure brings back the natural color to your hair. Thanks! R. E. Van Gordon, 1905 W. Milham Road, Kalamazoo, Mich.

Enclosed please find check for $5.00 for another bottle of Turn-er's as soon as possible. I have been bedeviled by a terrible itching in my eyebrows for over thirty years. It seemed to be a large flaky dandruff, but if I combed it out too near the skin, a watery substance would start, causing a scab-like condition. I have been to dozens of doctors . . . none did the slightest bit of good. After reading what Ray Palmer said, I decided to try Turn-er's. After the sixth application, I have not had an itch in my brows, and the skin underneath is as clear and clean as my face. I certainly am thankful to Mr. Palmer for bringing such a fine product to my attention.—S. W. Crusen, 2336 Fillmore Ave., Buffalo 14, N. Y.

Enaugh? Well, then take it fram Ray Palmer, one bottle of

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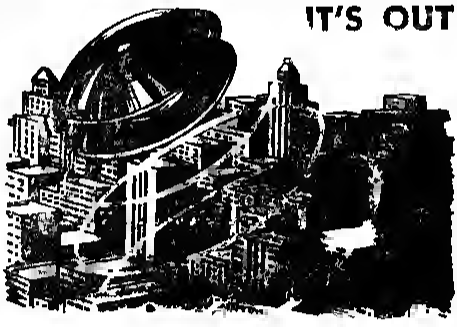

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